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# LES MARDIS



STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ  
and the artists of his circle

THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS MUSEUM OF ART

"They came each Tuesday, to marvel, to orient themselves, to understand themselves better. For the glory of their professor, their fervor and their fidelity would be decisive.

The dining room . . . was scarcely changed. The walls had been enriched slowly with works of art: to the two Manets had been added a seascape by Berthe Morisot, a nymph by Whistler, a pastel of flowers by Redon, a plaster piece by Rodin, a group of an aggressive faun . . . and an unastonished nymph, and finally this wood sculpture by Gauguin, the Maori profile which prompted Mallarmé to tease Maclair about a fancied resemblance. In the middle of the round table, the same pot of tobacco. Against the walls, enough chairs for a dozen people."

Henri Mondor, *Vie de Mallarmé*



8. MANET *Portrait of Mallarmé*



## FOREWORD

*Les Mardis*—the famous Tuesday receptions given by the poet Stéphane Mallarmé—provide the historical focus for this exhibition. To *Les Mardis* came the leading figures of the Parisian art world of the 1880's, poets, critics, novelists, musicians, and artists. A list of the latter reads like a roll call of the masters of nineteenth century art: Manet, Monet, Renoir, Morisot, Gauguin, Rodin, Munch, Whistler, Degas, Redon, Puvis de Chavannes.

There is another reason, however, for the selection of *Les Mardis* as an exhibition theme: the works brought together here present a unique opportunity for study of the complex interrelationships that existed during this period between poetry, painting and the other arts, and which manifested themselves in the aesthetic phenomenon of Symbolism. With this fact in mind the present catalogue containing scholarly essays on various aspects of the Symbolist movement has been prepared.

It is our hope that both the exhibition and the catalogue will be of interest to our visitors—students, scholars, and members of the general public alike—and that the catalogue may take its place as a genuine scholarly contribution to the knowledge of the art and literature of this important period of French cultural history.

Our deepest thanks to all those who have so generously assisted in the preparation of this exhibition, particularly to Mme. Hélène Adhémar, Conservateur au Département des Peintures, Musée du Louvre, M. Jean Chatelaine, Directeur des Musées de France, and M. Edouard Morot-Sir, Cultural Counselor of the French Embassy and Representative in the United States of French Universities, all of whom have extended every possible courtesy and have aided in countless ways. We are also grateful to the following institutions and individuals who have lent works for this exhibition:

The Art Institute of Chicago  
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The Library of Congress  
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MARILYN STOKSTAD  
BRET WALLER





Mallarmé about 1896

## THE WORLD OF MALLARMÉ'S CIRCLE THE HISTORICAL AMBIANCE: 1870-1914

"All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril."

Oscar Wilde, Preface to

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1890<sup>1</sup>

### I. EUROPE GENERALLY

No work of art is ever produced in a social vacuum or created wholly apart from some historical context; just as art can never be entirely explained in historical and social terms, neither can it be understood at all unless it is seen embedded in the tissue of the times in which it appeared. Art historians and literary critics frequently, and with full justification, isolate a work of art from its general ambiance for the sake of analyzing and clarifying its purely formal qualities. The historian of culture, however, reverses the process and seeks always to understand a work of art as a part of a larger pattern. This paper, written from the viewpoint of the historian, does not explore Symbolism as an artistic or literary style but, rather, attempts to examine it as an historical happening, to provide comment on its historical setting, and to suggest some historical and social explanations for it.

The phenomenon of Symbolism, which manifested itself in the visual and literary arts in the late nineteenth century, has been the object of many attempts at definition, none of them entirely successful. Indeed, any thought of a firm and final definition seems contrary to the very nature of Symbolism in that it was, after all, concerned with the elusive and the imaginative and sought to suggest rather than to specify. Art historians and literary critics, however, have not hesitated to march into this nebulous territory and to take possession of it with definitions of Symbolism which are, naturally and properly enough, the products of their particular disciplinary interests. General historians and historians of culture are inclined to see the movement as part of a larger historical and social complex and to define it in terms of its historical environment. Definitions of Symbolism put forth by historians refer to it as a "reaction against scientific Positivism";<sup>2</sup> as an aspect of "expressionism and neo-romanticism";<sup>3</sup> as a movement which "attempts the reunion of the two halves of experience—the inner or subjective part with the outer and communicable part" and "the third genuine and powerful phase of romanticism";<sup>4</sup> as a revolt against "the dry rigidity of science";<sup>5</sup> and as "an artistic vision which transcends physical reality but never abandons the world of the senses . . ."<sup>6</sup> As this representative sampling of opinions indicates, historians tend to agree that Symbolism constituted a rejection of scientific materialism, disdain for the rhetorical qualities of Romanticism, and impatience with the confining aspects of Realism, and emphasized a

turning inward of artistic consciousness. The implication is clear: to a significant degree, Symbolism represented a flight from the objective world into a poetic and imaginative world of subjective emotion. In this respect, Symbolism was indeed a part of a general cultural trend. During the last decades of the nineteenth century artists, philosophers, and critics expressed dissatisfaction with European society and with Western civilization generally. Evidence of this *malaise* which settled over the arts during these years and thickened as the century waned can be seen in many quarters and in diverse guises: the stoic despair of Matthew Arnold; the grim pessimism of Thomas Hardy; the revulsion which modern life inspired in Ruskin; the apocalyptic prophecies of Nietzsche and Léon Bloy; the escape into aestheticism taken by Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater, and Whistler; the satires of Aubrey Beardsley in England and Wilhelm Busch in Germany; the tormented loneliness of Edvard Munch; the anguish which marks the novels of Dostoevsky and Gogol; the hothouse exoticism of Gustave Moreau; the new purity painstakingly sought by the Pre-Raphaelites; the ostentatious naughtiness of Swinburne; the mocking bitterness of Ensor; the wilful wickedness of Rimbaud, who ended his career as a gun-runner in Africa; the haunting introspection of Odilon Redon; the erratic quality of Huysmans' oscillation from satanism to monasticism. Indeed, one might even argue that the three leading Post-Impressionist painters exemplify various escape routes not only from Impressionism but from the life of nineteenth-century Europe. Cézanne abandoned Paris for Provence and worked in virtual isolation, constructing a timeless and classic world in orderly planes of geometric color. Gauguin made the classic escape and literally ran off to the South Seas, leaving his respectable position and his wife and family behind. Van Gogh, after a series of pathetically earnest but futile attempts to seek a conventional way of life, took refuge in madness and the ultimate escape of suicide.

The writers, philosophers, and artists cited above compose a mixed lot indeed, a group admittedly most uneven in talent and influence. Many of them have little or nothing in common save the binding thread of the fact that all of them engaged in some form of protest—denunciation, despair, constructive criticism, rebellion, or flight—against the society and the times in which they lived. This binding thread, so dominant as to provide a *leitmotif* with variations, naturally attracts the attention of the cultural historian. Insofar as history is concerned, then, Symbolism may be seen as a part of the larger pattern of diverse protests mounted by artists and intellectuals against European society in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Here the problem and the danger of generalization arises, and nowhere in history does this danger become more acute than in the complex area of the cultural history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If Symbolism, intricate and diverse in itself, may be regarded as one *motif* in a larger pattern, that pattern is part of a still larger one. The themes of protest, de-

spair, and flight which loom so large in philosophy and art in the decades spanning the turn of the century are by no means the only themes to be observed. Artists who exhibited in the academic *salons* in France and at the Royal Academy in England turned out thousands of moralizing or narrative paintings which reflected the life of the era and its ideals and mores. Romanticism still lingered and occasionally gave forth with a death rattle vigorous enough to simulate life—Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* is an example. The "creative evolution" theories of Henri Bergson and his philosophy of the *élan vital* were essentially optimistic and seemed to point the way to a new salvation. The nascent style of Seurat was to prove that art could still be both great and joyful. But much of the most significant art and philosophy produced between 1880 and the First World War was neither joyful nor optimistic, and much of the art, both literary and visual, became increasingly introspective and divorced from the objective specifics of life. "Il ne fait aucun doute qu'un grand courant d'art sentimental et irrationnel parcourt tout le XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle."<sup>7</sup> These emotional and irrational qualities reached a climax in the last decades of the century, the period of Symbolism, and the first years of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

The view of art taken by social and cultural historians is admittedly both broad and limited, and in this view art is generally seen either as the expression of a society's most fundamental characteristics or as a reaction against those characteristics. If the validity of this view can be granted, the most important art of the late nineteenth century can be seen, at least in part, as an art of protest. But what was there in late nineteenth-century European society that caused artists and intellectuals either to condemn it or to turn away from it? Why did the bold thunder anathemas and the sensitive recoil? Was their world so wretched a place? Certainly it was not in the eyes of the vast majority of Europeans, especially those living in Western Europe. The paintings of the Impressionists, radiant with *joie de vivre* and sparkling sunlight, are more representative of the general mood of Western Europe in the late nineteenth century than is the work of the Symbolists and the Expressionists. The ideals of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, many of which carried over into the nineteenth century, appeared to be approaching realization. The optimism and the faith in human perfectability which the nineteenth century had inherited from the *philosophes* seemed pathetic and naïve after 1914 but had much justification in fact at the time.

The industrialization of Western Europe resulted in a long period of prosperity and a generally higher standard of living for all classes of society. Science made astonishingly rapid advances in all areas and seemed to offer at least the potential for the solution of all human problems. Education was gradually becoming not only desirable but compulsory; the literacy rate for Western Europe was high and mass education seemed to offer unlimited possibility for future progress. The late nineteenth century also saw the

beginnings of government welfare programs intended to improve the lot of the working classes. Europe had experienced no major war, no "world war," since the end of the Napoleonic period in 1815; all of the nineteenth-century wars were either brief (the Seven Weeks' War between Prussia and Austria, 1866), limited in scope and area (the Crimean War, 1854-56), or confined to two major powers (the Franco-Prussian War, 1870-71). Peace conferences, disarmament discussions, and the establishment of international courts at The Hague seemed to justify the hope that Europe would never again be torn by a major conflict and led many to believe that man had at last progressed beyond the barbarism of war. These hopes were reinforced in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the years just before World War I by the successful diplomatic settlement of a series of dangerous international crises, evidence that disputes which would have precipitated war in earlier times had become amenable to arbitration and diplomatic methods. It also appeared obvious in the last quarter of the nineteenth century that Western civilization was destined to rule the world; the great powers of Western Europe—England, France, and Germany—extended their influence around the globe as they acquired vast empires in exotic places. Political liberalism and democratic processes advanced on all fronts; even Russia, that retarded monolith of imperial autocracy, moved hesitantly toward Western democratic ideals, and liberals were encouraged by the reform movements initiated by the Tsar Alexander II. Prolonged peace, undeniable progress, far-flung power, and unprecedented prosperity—these elements composed the world of the European of the late nineteenth century. Certainly he had reason to believe that his was the best of all existing worlds and that his civilization carried within it the potential for a realization of the best of all possible worlds.

But, paradoxically, the very elements in late nineteenth-century life which gave the general public cause for satisfaction and optimism called forth dismay, scorn, and horror in the artists, writers, and intellectuals. The industrialization of society appeared to them a creeping grey blight which resulted in physical ugliness, moral decay, and spiritual disintegration, a technological development which tended to human degradation and which carried in its train a host of evils and social problems unknown before. And the prime product of industrialization was the arch-enemy of the arts, the bourgeoisie, the well-to-do middle class which dominated the political, cultural, social, and economic life of the entire nineteenth century. No understanding of the art of the nineteenth century is possible without an understanding of the fact that the bourgeoisie held the life of the era in its grasp; most of the art of the century must be comprehended, in historical and social terms, in relation to the dominant middle class in that most of it was created either to please this class, to defy it, or to escape from it. Nineteenth-century bourgeois mores and ideals were centered upon propriety, security, the accumulation of wealth, and

the retention of political and economic power. To the artists and philosophers, the bourgeoisie were smug, hypocritical, greedy and materialistic, narrowly conventional, insensitive, selfish, vulgar, ruthless and, perhaps worst of all, lacking in taste. Nietzsche held the middle class beneath contempt; Arnold and Ruskin, earnest and high-minded, lectured it on its failings; Romantics and some Symbolists and Expressionists took delight in shocking it by deliberately outraging its artistic and moral conventions—Gautier, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Gauguin, Huysmans, Oscar Wilde, and Swinburne are some of the more colorful examples. And while engaged in the satisfying sport of baiting the bourgeoisie, the artists and writers declined to cast their pearls before such swine and created a private visual and literary language which was not comprehensible to the uninitiated. For their part, the bourgeoisie regarded the rebellious artists and literary men with a mixture of fascination and horror, sometimes with indifference. The whole, the staid middle class looked upon this defiant minority as mad, bad, “bohemian,” and “decadent.” Most of all, and worst of all, the artistic rebels were considered useless and unproductive, narcissistic parasites who fed upon the work of decent, honest, respectable people. “All art is quite useless,” cried Oscar Wilde grandly, brandishing his calla lily in the faces of the industrialists and merchants.<sup>9</sup> This perpetual warfare between the bourgeoisie and the artists is a constant theme in nineteenth-century cultural history.

From another perspective, nineteenth-century intellectual trends led to conclusions which were as distasteful to artists and poets as were the physical and psychological effects of industrialization. The attempt to interpret society scientifically, best exemplified in the chilly philosophy of August Comte, is usually termed “scientific materialism” or “scientific positivism” and certainly had much in common with the Enlightenment. Nineteenth-century positivism, however, was devoid of the civilized tone and the humanism which were so much a part of eighteenth-century thought. “Positivism was rigid in applying science to society and it lacked the eighteenth-century belief in reason as well as that century’s optimism in the potentialities of man. Comte denied that man could alter his social institutions in accordance with his rational will.”<sup>10</sup> Most Europeans saw only the impressive results of applied science, but those who probed into the philosophical and theoretical aspects of scientific positivism saw quickly enough that it reduced man to a chemical compound required to function mechanistically within the framework of a set of inexorable scientific laws. And Darwinian concepts taken to their philosophical conclusions—which is something that Darwin himself never did—were further calculated to dismay the sensitive; here the conclusion seemed to be that man was merely the product of selective nature in a world where all was in constant flux and change, and that human life, deprived of norms, verities, gods, or goals, was simply a struggle for existence. Positivism and Darwinism together seemed to cast man into an

exterior darkness where, bereft of dignity and humanity, he was the pawn of blind natural forces beyond his control and, essentially, beyond his comprehension.

Earlier in the nineteenth century artists and writers had not hesitated to identify themselves with public life and to become engaged in social and political causes. Chateaubriand did not bother to conceal his disapproval of Napoleon and served the restored Bourbon dynasty as French ambassador to Great Britain and as minister of foreign affairs. Victor Hugo, whose politics were liberal in the Romantic tradition, spent years in exile during the Second Empire and fulminated regularly and loudly against the regime of the Emperor Napoleon III. Delacroix painted his *Liberty Leading the People*, a theatrically Romantic composition, in specific reference to the Revolution of 1830. The work of Daumier, a caricaturist by profession, is filled with political references and social observation. Courbet was an ardent and outspoken socialist and the great friend of Proudhon, theoretical anarchist, socialist, and a prominent leader of the workers' movement in mid-century France. The aristocratic and Romantic poet, Alphonse de Lamartine, served in the provisional government which followed the fall of the Orléanist monarchy in the Revolution of 1848. Berlioz fought at the barricades in 1830 and even Leconte de Lisle and Baudelaire took part in the battles of 1848. But the avant-garde and dissenting artists and literary men of the generation of the Symbolists retired from active life and placed their art solely at the service of their personal subjectivity. They stood apart from the "reality" which preoccupied most people and, turning their backs upon the external world, they sought what seemed to them the greater, safer, and more significant "reality" to be found in their own artistic imaginations. The earlier Romantics, full of baroque restlessness and energy, were always eager "to seek experience for its own sake" and "to try the possibilities of life,"<sup>11</sup> but the Symbolists, weary of causes, doubtful of all politics, disenchanted with all the "isms" of the nineteenth century, disillusioned with society, and often cynical, fled into art where they could create their own more satisfying and enduring version of reality. André Gide and many others have severely criticized the Symbolists for their retreat into a never-never land of poetic fantasy, but such was their solution to the moral, spiritual, and artistic bankruptcy which they saw in late nineteenth-century life. Others denounced, preached, lectured, or cried havoc; the Symbolists withdrew and created a world of mystery, image, and metaphor which could be inhabited only by themselves and those who knew their secrets.

## II. FRANCE SPECIFICALLY

France was defeated with stunning thoroughness in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. Paris was besieged and bombarded by the Prussians and the



17. RODIN *Bust of Victor Hugo*



French had to endure the humiliation of seeing the German Empire proclaimed into official existence in a ceremony which took place in the Hall of Mirrors in Louis XIV's Versailles. The peace treaty required the French to pay an indemnity of five billion francs and to surrender Alsace and one-third of Lorraine to Germany. The disaster of the war was accompanied by revolution at home and the collapse of Napoleon III's Second Empire. In the spring of 1871, the economic disorders and political confusions of the time engendered a rebellion against the conservative provisional government, and Paris was taken over by the Commune, a moderately "radical"<sup>12</sup> and faintly socialist group. The government, headed by Adolphe Thiers, besieged the city and in May invaded it to repress the revolt. The Communards resisted with fierce determination and the battle was fought from barricade to barricade with extreme violence and with merciless severity on both sides. At the end of this tragic "bloody week" the Commune was defeated at the cost of 20,000 lives and great social bitterness.

But France recovered from war and revolution with astonishing rapidity. After a period of doubt and hesitation, the nation settled down to a republican form of government, the Third Republic, dominated by political moderates, solid republicans and classic "liberals" who were essentially upper bourgeoisie and who derived their political and philosophical credo from the ideals of the French Revolution. From 1899 until the First World War France was governed by coalitions of liberals and socialists of various fine gradations of moderation and radicalism. All of these governments, very solicitous of the petty bourgeoisie, proved to be singularly indifferent to the social and economic problems which accompanied the industrialization of society, and relatively little was done for the urban poor or the working classes, although France became a great modern industrial power during this period and increased her national wealth and income significantly. "Industrial output tripled between 1870 and 1914; total national income probably doubled; French investments abroad increased sixfold."<sup>13</sup>

No comment on the history of late nineteenth-century France could be considered complete without reference to the famous Dreyfus affair, a *cause célèbre* which shook France to its foundations, divided families, terminated old friendships, provoked riots, duels, assaults, and a suicide, toppled ministries, caused the trial of Emile Zola for libel and forced his flight from France, involved the Church and the Army in charges of antisemitism, sundered the nation into two bitterly opposed camps, the Dreyfusards and the anti-Dreyfusards, and resulted in a flood of anticlerical legislation. The devastation which the Dreyfus affair wrought in Parisian drawing rooms is brilliantly presented and analyzed in Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. The facts in the case are relatively simple. In December, 1894, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, an Army staff officer of Jewish background, was convicted of selling French military secrets to the Germans, and in January,

1895, he was sent to penal servitude for life on Devil's Island. In the spring of 1896 Colonel Picquart, chief of the intelligence section of the French Army, raised questions about the validity of the evidence on which Dreyfus was convicted but found himself posted to duty in North Africa for his trouble; he was eventually dismissed from the Army. In December, 1897, Emile Zola, a survivor of the days of Naturalism in French literature, began publicly and passionately to champion Dreyfus' cause and accused the French general staff of criminal conspiracy in the conviction of an innocent man. By this time—1898—the government was involved in the case and the following years were filled with denunciations and accusations, charges and countercharges, and an appalling tangle of legal maneuvers and political repercussions. In August and September of 1899 Dreyfus was given a new trial and was again found guilty of treason, but this time with "extenuating circumstances." He was immediately granted a presidential pardon, however, and in 1906 the verdict of guilty adjudged against him was quashed. Dreyfus was restored to his Army rank and in July, 1906, was awarded the Legion of Honor, for whatever consolation that might have been to him.

The Dreyfus affair has spawned a whole library of literature and has become so overlaid with legend and so surrounded with conflicting opinion and interpretation that virtually any generalized statement made about it is vulnerable to attack. For the most part, however, the Dreyfusards, Captain Dreyfus' defenders, were liberal intellectuals and "radical" politicians who insisted upon the abstract ideal of absolute justice for all, whereas the anti-Dreyfusard camp was composed of political conservatives, the Army, the Church, and antisemitic groups who clung to the belief that Dreyfus was guilty and who insisted that, in any event, the morale of the Army and the prestige of the nation must not be damaged by indiscreet inquiries into the correctness of the Dreyfus conviction. This sordid and tragic affair was symptomatic of many of the controversies present in French life in the late nineteenth century and touched upon explosive issues which smoldered beneath the bland prosperity of the period—social and economic conservatism and radicalism, the Church and anticlericalism, class conflict, venality and corruption in high office, militarism, antisemitism, the role of the Army in the structure of government, and the value of the individual in terms of the needs of the state. One immediate result of the Dreyfus case was the political triumph of the Dreyfusards, and from 1899 to 1914 France was governed by ministries composed of shifting coalitions of Moderates, Radicals, and Socialists. As soon as the Dreyfusards came to power they instituted an elaborate program of anticlerical legislation and took their revenge upon the Army by setting out to purge it of elements which they deemed aristocratic and reactionary.

The Dreyfus affair proved to be a whirlwind which agitated French society for years, and at the vortex of the whirlwind was the Army. The dis-

turbance appeared at a time when militarism, nationalism, and imperialism, the three dominant "isms" of the late nineteenth century, were gaining in importance and enhancing the general significance of armed forces throughout Europe. In common with the other great powers of Europe, France entered the race for overseas possessions and carved out an impressive empire in Asia and Africa. French expansion in Africa clashed with British imperial interests there and, indeed, the "Fashoda incident" in 1898 brought these two major powers dangerously close to war. Those who are inclined to think only in terms of very recent times and to regard France and Britain as firm allies are always shocked to be reminded that the two nations were traditional enemies for centuries and that this enmity and mutual suspicion was overcome, with painful adjustments on both sides, only in the years just preceding the First World War. In 1898 French expeditionary troops met British forces under Lord Kitchener at Fashoda in the Sudan, both nations taking the position that the other had trespassed into its sphere of influence. The French withdrew in order to avert the danger of an imperial conflict with Britain, but recurring international crises of this nature were to give European diplomats and statesmen some harrowing days until the final and fatal crisis came in 1914.

Although there was superficial evidence in European society to lull the hopeful into imagining that another great war was impossible or unlikely, those on the "inside"—the statesmen, the diplomats, and the general staffs—knew only too well that the peace of Europe depended upon a delicately balanced structure of international power politics, and that any international crisis or "incident" might prove to be the uncontrollable one which would send the political structure crumbling into shards. All historians agree that one of the primary causes of the First World War was a system of international alliances which divided Europe into two suspicious groups of nations. One of the first steps in this fateful diplomatic quadrille came in 1891 when republican France, mother of revolutions and revolutionary ideals, entered into a cautious accord with imperial Russia, the last important relic of old-fashioned autocracy in the European family of nations. This rather surprising agreement, which was reinforced in 1894 by a "military connection," can be explained in terms of Russian fears of Austrian expansion in the Balkans (imperial Austria was Germany's ally), French ambitions for the recovery of Alsace and Lorraine, and a general French-Russian suspicion of Germany's power and intentions.

Much has been made of a revival in France at the turn of the century of *revanche* or revenge feelings directed at Germany and focused upon the loss of Alsace-Lorraine in the 1870-71 war. Certainly it is true that the French never forgot the lost provinces or entirely abandoned the hope of seeing them restored to her one day, but the Alsace-Lorraine question was only one of many international problems which threatened the peace and led to an un-

easy shifting of alliances. Each new alliance exacerbated existing tensions. The Franco-Russian agreement intensified Germany's old, haunting fear of being crushed between the French on the west and a Cossack "steam roller" on the east. German fears were further deepened in 1903 and 1904 when the French and British governments negotiated a deliberately vague *entente cordiale* in which King Edward VII of Great Britain, a lifetime Francophile, was used as an instrument of policy by the British government in overcoming French hostility. In 1907 the *entente cordiale* between Britain and France was enlarged into a Triple Entente which included Russia. By 1907, then, sides had been chosen, and armies and armaments were steadily strengthened. On June 28, 1914, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian throne, and his wife were assassinated in Sarajevo by a Bosnian revolutionary. The event seemed at first to be merely another Balkan crisis, many of which had been smoothed over before, but within six weeks proved to be the event which set the great alliance machinery into motion and gave the armies their marching orders. The shots that killed the Archduke and his Duchess also ended the nineteenth century and the world that the Symbolists knew.

### III. CONCLUSION

The noonday glories of the Victorian era and the sunset splendors of the Edwardian years died at the Marne and at Verdun and on the barbed wire and in the trenches of the countless other miserable battlefields of the First World War. The catastrophic disasters foretold by heretic prophets such as Nietzsche and Bloy fell upon a European society stunned with shock that such things could still happen. The world of late nineteenth-century Europe, high-spirited with optimism, flushed with pride and power, gilded by prosperity and material progress, was brought down by an ancient foe, the Four Horsemen; never again was Western civilization to feel the confidence in the present and the hope for the future that the Victorians had taken for granted. In the years immediately following the war intellectuals, historians, and writers, clothed in sackcloths, ashes, and disillusionment, mournfully worried over the remains of the world they had known and nervously sorted the bones of old sins in an effort to understand why these evils had engulfed them, how they had gone astray, and where the guilt should lie. All during the course of the nineteenth century certain intellectuals, philosophers, writers, poets, and artists—always a rebellious or dissenting minority in a complacent majority—had stated or implied a belief that there was "something wrong" with their world. And, in the last analysis, the "realities" which the Symbolist artists and poets sought in the shadowy regions of imagination and inner consciousness proved to be more enduring than the "realities" of the solid and substantial society which they found uninspiring and offensive and from which they turned away in weariness and indifference.

Tel qu'en Lui-même enfin l'éternité le change,  
 Le Poète suscite avec un glaive nu  
 Son siècle épouvanté de n'avoir pas connu  
 Que la mort triomphait dans cette voix étrange!<sup>14</sup>

(As eternity finally changes him into  
 Himself, the Poet arouses with a naked  
 sword his century terrified not to have  
 known that death triumphed in this strange  
 voice!)

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## NOTES

1. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, London: Ward Lock and Bowden Limited, 1891, "Preface," p. vii.

2. Eugene Weber, *Paths to the Present: Aspects of European Thought from Romanticism to Existentialism*, New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, Inc., 1960, p. 205.

3. George L. Mosse, *The Culture of Western Europe, The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1961, pp. 216-217. It is significant that Professor Mosse does not use the term "Symbolism" in this work and explains a poet like Rimbaud, usually classified as a Symbolist, within the framework of the two terms cited above. Symbolist artists, however, generally disliked being associated with Romanticism, which they rejected as gross, vulgar, obvious, and explicit.

4. Jacques Barzun, *Classic, Romantic, and Modern*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961, pp. 110-111.

5. Gordon Wright, *France in Modern Times, 1700 to the Present*, Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1960, p. 373.

6. Alfred Cobban, *A History of Modern France*, 2 volumes; Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961, II, p. 259.

7. Pierre Francastel, "Les grandes tendances de l'Art européen au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Ses sources d'inspiration, ses procédés d'expression," *Cahier d'histoire mondiale*, III, 4 (1957), p. 940. ("It cannot be doubted that a marked trend of emotional and irrational art permeates the entire nineteenth century." Translation by the author of this paper.)

8. Some qualification of the implications inherent in this statement is necessary. Not all of the Symbolists delighted in irrationality and a few of them had fundamentally classicistic minds; Paul Valéry, for example, had the utmost contempt for Romantic emotionalism and always insisted that Symbolism never abandoned reason but, on the contrary, purified it by detachment and abstraction.

9. Wilde, *op. cit.*, "Preface," p. vii.

10. Mosse, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

11. Edmund Wilson, *Alex's Castle, a Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870 to 1930*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959, p. 265.

12. The word "radical" in reference to French politics must be used with caution; in English the term implies extreme political views, usually of the far left, but this connotation is by no means always accurate for French political parties designated as "radical."

13. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

14. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Poésies*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945, p. 129. First stanza of Mallarmé's poem *Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe* (*The Tomb of Edgar Poe*). Translation by the author of this paper.



6. MANET *The Raven*



4. GAUGUIN *Portrait of Mallarmé*

## ENDYMION IN FRANCE: A BRIEF SURVEY OF FRENCH SYMBOLIST POETRY

Into Elysium; vying to rehearse  
Each one his anticipated bliss  
Keats, "Endymion"

### External History

No other movement in the history of French letters has been more the object of commentary, criticism and controversy than the Symbolist school which dominated the last half of the nineteenth century. The enormous number of critical essays and exegetical studies purporting to define and to explain what these "decadent" French poets were trying to do arrived at widely divergent views which seemed at times to cloud all understanding of the movement. The apparent obscurity which confronted the average French reader, accustomed to the ring of the grand classics or the lyrical flights of the Romantics, led eventually to the irritated critical accusation of sterility if not of outright literary fraud. The Symbolist group, a loosely knit entity rebellious at even being called a "school," was no doubt both aided and injured by criticism. The poets had to spring to their own defense in the multitude of journals which came to life (as is invariably the case under such circumstances) in order to defend, clarify and promulgate a literary faith under attack. Criticism was so scathing that the very mention of the poets and their private lives (often far from edifying) was enough to create a scandal. In contrast to the Romantic-Classic battle, the Symbolist struggle was characterized both by attacks from without and by an inner conflict among factions devoted to competing ideals. The poets had, therefore, to engage in a defense of their aspirations against a hostile public while attempting at the same time to carry on a constant linguistic experimentation. The general history of the movement is, for these reasons, extremely complicated and difficult to piece together into a coherent whole. There are, however, certain general statements which can be made without too much fear of contradiction.

The terms "*symbole*," "*symbolisme*" and "*symbolique*" were used early in the nineteenth century long before their adoption to designate a particular school. Alexandre Guiraud used them as early as 1824 in *La Muse Française*, Jouffroy referred to symbolism in his *Cours d'Esthétique* (1843), the critic Scudo heaped abuse on Wagner by speaking of his symbolistic traits, and Baudelaire used the terms often in both prose and poetry.<sup>1</sup> It was only toward 1885 that they began to be used to refer to a group of poets under the influence of Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé. It had become by this time a name adopted by young poets in order to distinguish themselves from rival groups such as the "*Hirsutes*" and the "*Décadents*."



The year 1885 marks a significant period in the history of French Symbolism. The death of Victor Hugo, high priest of French poetry since the earliest years of Romanticism, had created a vacuum in the world of poetry. The newest concept to fill it during this period was the idea of a "decadence," a literary phenomenon characterized by a taste for the ultra-refined, the horrible and the morbidly fascinating; a taste no doubt inherited from the Romantic poets by way of Baudelaire. The younger poets surpassed one another in melancholy and anguished poems exploiting the themes of death, suffering and exaggerated despair. Of special interest was the publication of two prose works, one by Verlaine and one by Joris-Karl Huysmans. *Poètes Maudits* by Verlaine is an exploitation of the "accursed poet" motif which defines the essentially anti-bourgeois pose of the poets and affirms the almost mystic fervor in the cult of poetry as practiced by these young men. The novel *A Rebours* by Huysmans gave much-needed publicity to the work of Verlaine and Mallarmé, and began to establish them as the models for the young Symbolists who were still floundering in an anguished state of mind without yet having found a valid artistic concept.

The year 1885 saw another impetus to the Symbolist cause given by a rather poor literary joke. Begun in *Lutèce* and continued in a prolonged series of journalistic discussions, the famous *Déliquescences d'Adoré Floupette* and its concomitant disputes contributed powerfully to the modification of the idea of decadence. This mordant satire against the extravagances of decadent behavior and pose succeeded in turning the favor of the young toward the aspects of suggestivity and musicality, aspects which Mallarmé and Verlaine had already stressed in their critical pronouncements.

The year 1886 witnessed the flowering of the Symbolist school. The name was officially adopted by the poets when Jean Moréas, in reply to a hostile article, rejected once and for all the artificiality of decadence.<sup>2</sup> The title was immediately accepted and proclaimed by the hundreds of literary journals which propagated the new poetic credo. Although many of these periodicals were short-lived, they nonetheless were of considerable importance in bringing the poems and critical articles to the attention of the reading public. The leadership of Mallarmé and Verlaine was represented by *Lutèce*, *La Revue Indépendante* and the *Revue Wagnérienne*. *La Pléiade*, *Le Scapin* and *La Vogue* successfully countered the opposition of *Le Décadent*. The Symbolist triumph was not to last, however, for in the following year a violent struggle for the clarification of literary doctrine began. A masterful account of this battle of the periodicals is given by Professor Kenneth Cornell in *The Symbolist Movement*.<sup>3</sup> By 1890 the critical attacks had begun to take their toll. The Symbolist movement seemed doomed after the appearance of several new philosophies which were born, ironically enough, from the very heart of the movement—its insistence on freedom and experimentation. The schisms of "Romanism" and "Naturism," among others, represented extreme positions

in the search for an ideal, as a proliferation of branches led to a weakening of the main stem. The end of the century seemed to spell the end of Symbolism.

Although it is not really possible to mention all the poets generally associated with the Symbolist movement, it is possible to cite those names which most critics place in the direct lines of succession of Mallarmé, Verlaine and Rimbaud, respectively. Most often to be found in the line of Verlaine are: Jules Laforgue, Tristan Corbière, Albert Samain, Le Cardonnell and Maurice de Guérin. Most closely associated with the influence of Rimbaud are: Saint-Pol-Roux, the Surrealist poets such as André Breton or Jean Cocteau, and the mystical phases of Paul Claudel's religious poetry. The descendants of Mallarmé, by far the more numerous, are: Paul Valéry, Jean Moréas, René Ghil, Maurice Maeterlinck, Stuart Merrill, Edouard Dujardin, Andre Fontainas, Albert Mockel, Viéllé-Griffin, Paul Fort, Emile Verhaeren and the more linguistically oriented symbolism of Claudel.

### Aesthetics

No presentation of the history of the Symbolist movement can reveal its aesthetic system, an aspect which is at once the most important and the most difficult to understand. The very richness of this movement, heralding the advent of all modern poetry and devoted to experimentation and innovation, is astounding. Any attempt to generalize is bound to err in certain particulars. But the general tenets of Symbolism can be discussed if one admits that it is a question of a part-philosophical and part-literary ideal. The Symbolist school advocates a development of the intuitive faculties over the rational workings of the mind so favored in French neo-classicism of the seventeenth century. It stresses the subjective and ignores the objective as unworthy. It can also be considered the expression of a basic tendency of human nature, if one places it in the line of mystic, oracular, illuminist and idealist traditions. It has been called a reintegration of the ideal in poetry. This is, of course, an oversimplification, but it represents one of the basic attitudes of the poets who sensed a higher reality behind the world of appearances. All phenomena are indications of that reality and thus acquire a symbolic value. Between exterior phenomena and the higher reality there is a bond made up of analogies detected only through the aesthetic experience. These quasi-philosophical ideas represent an attitude of good poets toward poetry, not merely an abstract conception never the object of practical research. The poet is no longer content with the simple expression of sentiments, the celebration of public events, the glorification of legend and history or the elaboration of the exotic in time or space. The modern poet is involved in a serious search for truth, a search concerned with the reintegration of all the elements of human experience into a harmonious whole. The tool of this research is not scientific analysis, but a kind of super-rational intuition.

No examination of French Symbolism can be complete without an analysis of its philosophical background. Critics often point to Plato and the Eastern thinkers (5th and 6th centuries B.C.) as the originators of the transcendental or the metaphysical current which gave birth to a literary manifestation that became fully conscious of itself only in the second half of the nineteenth century. If Symbolism is considered to be merely a reaction against the harsh reality and scientific impersonality of the positivist and materialistic age of the last century, the long metaphysical tradition behind it is generally neglected or grossly understated. Plato gave prominence to the *Idea* itself as the basis for any ontological system, and the whole medieval tradition continued in this vein, interpreting all exterior objects as reflections of the divine essence. Renaissance humanism seemed to place highest value on man's own interpretation and evaluation of phenomena in the universe. From interpretations of Cartesian philosophy, two streams of thought are born in the seventeenth century. The one, rational and purely objective, is continued and magnified by the eighteenth century *philosophes*; the other, more subjective in character, is developed in the nineteenth century, especially by German philosophers such as Hegel and Schopenhauer.

The scientific spirit, the mechanistic and materialistic trend, becomes the near ancestor of the present faith in science as the be-all and the end-all of modern existence. During the second half of the nineteenth century in France, scientific materialism showed a tendency to break apart under the weight of its mass of terms and techniques which had become as complicated as any metaphysical epistemology. The concept of the wholeness of phenomena began to gain ground as, for example, the biologists cried union of the physical and the psychological. The love of history, of considerable importance throughout most of the nineteenth century, gave way to Freud's exploration of the unconscious. The literary situation was ripe for change as the realist and naturalist trends in French letters began to pall. A return to the metaphysical came in the form of Symbolist poetry.

### Works and Poets

The usual history of Symbolism in France, that of the three generations; (1. Baudelaire and early precursors, 2. Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud, 3. Laforgue, Lautréamont, etc.) is not strictly accurate even if it is convenient. The immediate predecessors of these poets shared many of their themes, attitudes and techniques. Gérard de Nerval (1808-1855) believed in the possibility of transcendent knowledge through poetry. Aloysius Bertrand (1807-1841) is said to have inaugurated the prose poem typical of many late Symbolists. The poetry of hallucination and similar states is often cited as a most important adjunct to the Symbolist system. According to Mallarmé and to Valéry, Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), the famous American poet, is to be cited also as an important influence on the formation of modern French

poetry. Most of Poe's important aesthetic works were translated into French by Baudelaire and later by others. This influence was of a very general nature and left room to the individual poet to develop his own theories as additions of personal character. It is a question here of an attitude toward life and toward art. The instinct for beauty, the love of musicality in poetry, the theme of the poet-outcast or accursed poet, the techniques of intentional vagueness of atmosphere and visionary power, and many other themes which are to be found in later French poetry are of importance in Poe's critical theories.

As for a coherent definition of the term *symbolisme* given by the poets and the critics themselves, there is an amazing mass of material which differs widely in tone depending on the bias of the critic or poet in question. According to Paul Valéry, the favored disciple of Mallarmé, the confusion surrounding this term can be dispelled only by admitting the common trait of all the poets—a desire for complete independence from all schools and all artistic conventions.<sup>4</sup> Rémy de Gourmont, a leading critic of the times, attempted his own definition of the term:

What does Symbolism mean? If one insists on the strict etymological sense of the term, almost nothing; if one goes beyond this, it can mean: individualism in literature, freedom of art, abandonment of conventional formulae, tendencies toward the new, the strange, and even the bizarre; it can mean also: idealism, disdain for the social conventions, anti-naturalism, a tendency to take only the characteristic detail from life, to heed only the act which distinguishes one man from another, to wish only for results, for the essential.<sup>5</sup>

Any capsule definition would seem to be impossible and, in fact, a good case could be made for the exclusion of most of the major poets from the school on purely technical grounds alone. To stress the aspects of individualism, of freedom and of technical experimentation is perhaps to give a better evaluation of what Symbolism actually means in terms of the works themselves. These are almost the only generalizations which can give an accurate idea of the work of hundreds of poets. It is to be remembered that even the words of the poet himself are not always to be taken at face value when he defines and explains his ideas. He is, after all, defending his own cause and cannot be blamed too much if he tends to exaggerate certain aspects. The words of the critics, interesting enough in themselves, are not to be gathered together as a final statement on the question. They are useful only as a commentary to be read after the works themselves. It is probable that many of the apparent contradictions in opinions and interpretations could be resolved by a re-reading of the texts with the idea in mind of seeking useful generalities instead of wishing to propagate a highly individual interpretation. Let us, therefore, limit ourselves to a general survey of the poetry of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine and Rimbaud in order to develop a first-hand view.

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE (1821-1867) was, according to Victor Hugo, the poet who brought a *frisson nouveau*, a new quality, to French poetry. A poet of the urban age, he exalts the artificial over the natural, and considers the human being in such an environment. He points out in his famous "*Au lecteur*" (to the reader) a modern illness: "ennui," a kind of spiritual apathy which takes hold of man in contemporary life. Baudelaire's poetic tone is bitter but bracing as he aims with deadly accuracy to pierce the numbing complacency he finds in human nature. His themes are many, among them, beauty, death, time and art. His constant aesthetic process consists of an elevation of the common objects of everyday life into a heightened poetic suggestivity. His principal work, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), is divided into sections which depict two fundamental tendencies he finds in human nature—the one directed toward Satan, the other toward God. Another section is descriptive and evocative of Parisian scenes and life. A famous sonnet, "*Correspondances*," establishes the aesthetic basis for Baudelaire's art, namely that the poet can perceive the subtle analogies in nature which bind the whole universe together. By a blend of images, sounds and rhythms he sought to establish symbols which represent the absolute itself. Author of literary and art criticism, of poems in prose, and a translator of Poe, Baudelaire inaugurates a tone of literary "decadence" and takes the torch of French poetry from the hands of Victor Hugo. His work is extraordinary in its complexity and its beauty, but it does show some aspects of romantic pose and oratory. Baudelaire was not really a technical innovator of verse form, but he does have the singular merit of having inspired more than even he could realize. He represents the frontier between the Romantic and the Symbolist. His Symbolist traits can be qualified as those which stress the aspect of suggestivity through artistic transformation of common objects within a framework of the struggle between good and evil, the ugly and the beautiful, and longings for death and artificial paradise.

ARTHUR RIMBAUD (1854-1891), although much younger than the other poets, still belongs spiritually to their generation. As a boy of sixteen he wrote his famous "*Lettre du Voyant*" (1871) proclaiming the poet as a seer capable of discovering the unknown world of ideas through self-knowledge by means of a "*dérèglement des sens*," a disorientation of the senses usually done deliberately. He thus began a three-year career of the most astounding virtuosity and originality. Various interpretations picture Rimbaud as a *voleur de feu*, a kind of rival to Prometheus, a seeker of absolute knowledge, a manifestation of angelistic tendencies to expiate for human sin, and even as a rival of God. These ideas, picturesque though they may be, seem to neglect the fact that Rimbaud was a conscious artist with an extremely rapid technical development of a mental faculty which was to influence the Surrealist poets of the next century. His verses are characterized by such devices as indeterminate images made by suppressing links in similes. His themes

are those of the voyage of discovery which is poetry, as in his famous "*Bateau Ivre*," and those half-forgotten depths of childhood and of the unconscious. These are expressed in a wonderfully fresh and articulate language which seems to surround the idea and buoy it up to new heights of directness of expression. One often has the impression in reading Rimbaud that the innocence of a very wise child is brought to bear on everything from a macrocosm of Miltonian vastness to a child's doll. All is transformed into something else which inspires a feeling of wonderment. His best known works are two vast poems in prose: *Illuminations* (1871) and *Une Saison en Enfer* (1873). *Illuminations* recounts the spiritual struggle composed of incredibly rich visions of real and unreal worlds. *Une Saison en Enfer* affirms the poet's innocence and integrity in the face of the eternal battle of good and evil. Rimbaud wants to rid the world of evil, to fulfill himself in art and to realize the greatest possibilities of mankind.

In order to suggest the idea that order is re-established in the world after the cataclysmic floods of prehistory, and that social and religious institutions are quickly formed, he says:

Madame . . . établit un piano dans les Alpes. La messe et les premières communions se célèbrent aux cent mille autels de la cathédrale.<sup>6</sup>

To express his distaste for the frustration of artistic creation:

La musique savante manque à notre désir. . . .<sup>7</sup>

To affirm that the poet has an insight into the meaning of existence and the seemingly incomprehensible conduct of man in the universe:

J'ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage.<sup>8</sup>

To suggest the ominous state and fate of humankind:

Voici venir le temps des Assassins.<sup>9</sup>

Rimbaud's technical and imaginative brilliance are almost unparalleled in French letters, and they are all the more astounding when one remembers that his whole poetic career lasted only three years. He abandoned poetry for a life of hazardous adventure which ended in his death at the age of thirty seven, as if he had been worn out by the effort of his creativity during the brief period of his adolescence.

PAUL VERLAINE (1844-1896) is the poet whose name is synonymous with the ideals of musicality in modern French poetry. Is he a Symbolist in spite of his highly refined and rather romantic sensibility and lyricism? There are no lakes of crystal, no mysterious swans, no philosophies of Platonic ideals behind his verses. Indeed, the association of any savant philosophy with his work is ridiculous. One can, however, definitely place Verlaine in the Symbolist camp because of his Impressionist-like tendencies based on the very fact of musicality. He paints and suggests in a rich alliance of sound and idea. His dreamlike reveries seem to concentrate largely on the unstable states

of matter and the dawn or dusk periods in which ordinary objects seem to be transformed. The gentle emotions of love and of sadness seem to permeate his works. Of all the poets of his generation, Verlaine seems to be the most oriented toward the visual experience as revealed in his use of images drawn from nature to express very subtle psychological nuances. The play of light and shadow, and the evocation of color are important in his verses. In many of his poems, especially in "*Fêtes Galantes*" (1869), there are more direct references to the visual arts.

The themes of Verlaine's poetry are roughly parallel to his life. After a proper upbringing he turned to a life of drink and dissolution recalling that of the medieval poet François Villon. His "liaison" with Rimbaud ended in a shooting which was the greatest scandal of the epoch. The influence of Baudelaire is evident in Verlaine's first collection, "*Poèmes Saturniens*," which has an "*au lecteur*" resembling Baudelaire's in that Verlaine places the poet under the fatal zodiac sign of Saturn, and implies a cursed life for him. The Watteau-like figures of "*Fêtes Galantes*" provide a background for phantoms which recall the characters of the *Comedia dell'Arte*. His love for his former fiancée is exploited in "*La bonne chanson*," and the recurrent religious motif in his work seems to be centered in "*Sagesse*." Of all the modern French poets, Verlaine seems to have written those verses which are best remembered and most often quoted. Let us examine some of these in order to gain an idea of the extraordinary musicality and of the highly conscious art of one of the greatest masters of French poetry:

Il pleure dans mon cœur  
Comme il pleut sur la ville.  
Quelle est cette langueur  
Qui pénètre mon cœur?  
O bruit doux de la pluie  
Par terre et sur les toits!  
Pour un cœur qui si'ennuie,  
O le chant de la pluie!<sup>10</sup>

The picturesque and charming "*Fêtes Galantes*" begin with the famous quatrain:

Votre âme est un paysage choisi  
Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques,  
Jouant du luth et dansant et quasi  
Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques.<sup>11</sup>

One may question the sincerity of Verlaine's religious belief, but not the artistic sincerity of:

Je ne veux plus aimer que ma mère Marie.<sup>12</sup>

or of:

Mon Dieu m'a dit: Mon fils il faut m'aimer.<sup>13</sup>

The most affective among the Symbolist poets, then, his verses depend upon extreme fluidity and suggestivity in sound and in idea.

STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ (1842-1898), the spiritual father of all the Symbolist poets, represents the most highly refined intellectual aspect of the movement. He had a quasi-philosophical goal of expressing the absolute in finite terms, and advocated a systematic theory to accomplish this: (1) *Suggestion* is all-important since direct expression destroys the poetic mystery. (2) The word is to be systematically explored for the best uses to be made of its properties, both sound and sense. (3) Language, grammar and syntax are to be used for exclusively poetic aims, which differ from those of ordinary speech. The aim of a new poetic language is to attempt the establishment of states of mind and not the one-to-one relationship between an object and the name we have for it.

Mallarmé's poetic output is relatively small, consisting for the most part of several short poems written after his famous "*Après-midi d'un Faune*" (1876). With the exception of his "*Hérodiade*," a dramatic poem, and of "*Igitur*," a prose poem published in 1925, his sonnets are the most widely known of Mallarmé's works. A small number of prose works of literary and poetic theory are collected under the title of *Divagations*. Why, then, in the face of such a small number of published works, did Mallarmé become the acknowledged leader of a whole generation—as the attendance at his famous *Mardis* testifies? How could such an insignificant provincial English teacher attract the great and the near great of two generations? The answer lies most probably in the apparent obscurity and hermetic character of his verses which, no doubt, irritated and stimulated the curiosity of hundreds of critics. The extraordinary density of these tiny poems hides a world within the fourteen lines of each. It would be necessary to examine at length the technical processes of the poet in order to have a complete understanding of his Symbolism. Let us consider a few examples of the work in order to draw some general conclusions.

In addition to common allusions made to known or artificially contrived events (the series of "*Tombeaux*" poems celebrating the glory of a poet deceased) Mallarmé has frequent recourse to linguistic tricks consisting of manipulations of both vocabulary and syntax. To describe the act of writing and the magic of poetic transformation we find:

notre si vieil ébat triomphal du grimoire<sup>14</sup>

The hour of sunset and of death becomes:

... l'heure commune et vile de la cendre<sup>15</sup>

The above paraphrases recall another description of the sunset in which one of the members of a comparison is dropped:

victorieusement fui le suicide beau<sup>16</sup>



A good example of the alliance between sound and sense serving to describe an object which never existed is:

Aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore<sup>17</sup>

That is to say, a sea shell used as a bibelot on the poet's table. When put to the ear it gives forth sonorous inanities just as the poem can do. Another example of such extreme concentration and suggestivity is the whole poem, "*toute l'âme résumée . . .*," in which the only action is the contemplation of a burning cigar. As the cigar is *consumed* in a "*clair baisier de feu*," so the entire soul of the smoker is *resumed* (or summarized) in the smoke which he exhales.<sup>18</sup> In the same way the poet's soul is contained in the exhalations of his mind—the poems. A fan in the hands of his daughter becomes:

ce blanc vol fermé que tu poses  
Contre le feu d'un bracelet<sup>19</sup>

A common glass flower vase is considered from this point of view:

Surgi de la croupe et du bond  
D'une verrerie éphémère  
Sans fleurir la veillée amère  
Le col ignoré s'interrompt.<sup>20</sup>

It quickly becomes evident from these examples that emotions and ideas are purposely muted in these poems. It is a question of a point of view, of a new way of expressing ordinary things. The themes are simple: common every-day objects, the act of poetic creation and its difficulties, a considerable sensuality, and an abstract game of presence-absence or sterility-fertility. The poet is involved in a struggle to tear from unwilling words a truer picture of the totality of reality, as he attempts to show that each object so commonly accepted is an extremely complex substance having thousands of attributes usually ignored. Far from being a pessimistic withdrawal from life and a refuge taken in a kind of modified preciousness, Mallarmé's poetry is, in fact, an exaltation of the mind's grasp of exterior reality and its own power over this reality.

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With this necessarily cursory evaluation of the beginnings of Symbolism and the Symbolist point of view, let us now make a final attempt at defining the term. Symbolism suggests certain predominant attitudes toward external reality and toward the manipulation of language during the last half of the nineteenth century in France. There is a belief in a world of ideal beauty and a conviction that it can be realized in art. The literary symbol, unlike religious symbols with their old and established meanings, varies according to the poet. It is an indirect metaphor meant to suggest a hidden reality, and it has a powerful emotional and intellectual resonance which mirrors directly

the mental and affective preoccupations of the poet. In the case of French Symbolism and according to the poets themselves, art has acquired a new technique, a new dignity, and a new purpose. The poet has become a priest and a philosopher, and poetry has been reestablished in honor in the modern world.

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## NOTES

1. Quoted from Joseph Chiari. *Symbolism from Poe to Mallarmé* (Foreword by T. S. Eliot). New York, Macmillan, 1965, p. 76.
2. *Figaro*. Sept. 18, 1886.
3. Kenneth Cornell. *The Symbolist Movement*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1951.
4. Paul Valéry. *Oeuvres Complètes*. (Edition of La Pléiade), Vol. I, Paris, Gallimard, p. 687.
5. Quoted from Joseph Chiari, *Symbolism from Poe to Mallarmé* (Foreword by T. S. Eliot), New York, Macmillan, 1956, p. 113.
6. Rimbaud, A. *Oeuvres*. "Illuminations" (Textes établis par H. Bouillane de Lacoste). Paris, Mercure de France, 1950, p. 209. (Madame X establishes a piano in the Alps. Mass and first Communions are celebrated on the hundred thousand altars of the cathedral.)
7. *Ibid.*, p. 216. (Our desires are lacking a learned music.)
8. *Ibid.*, p. 217. (I alone have the key to this savage parade.)
9. *Ibid.*, p. 226. (Behold the age of murderers.)
10. Paul Verlaine. *Oeuvres*.  
(It weeps in my heart/as it rains on the city/what is this langor/which penetrates my heart?  
Oh sweet noise of the rain/on the earth and the roofs/for a heart which is sick/oh the song of the rain.)
11. *Ibid.*, p. Your soul is a special landscape/where pass charming masks and bergamasks/  
Playing on the lute and dancing and half/sad under their fantastic disguises.
12. *Ibid.*, p. (No other shall I love but my mother Mary.)
13. *Ibid.*, p. (My God has said: My son you must love me.)
14. Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Poésies*. Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 135. (Our so old game of magic boxes.)
15. *Ibid.*, p. 76. (. . . the common and vile hour of the cinder.)
16. *Ibid.*, p. 125. (Victoriously fled the beautiful suicide.)
17. *Ibid.*, p. 127. (Abolished bibelot of sonorous inanities.)
18. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 85 (This white closed flight which you pose/against the fire of a bracelet.)
20. *Ibid.*, p. 145. (Sprung from the leap and the croup/of a glassware ephemeral/flowering  
no bitter vigil/the neck forgotten stops.



14. REDON *Aurora*

## VARIETIES OF SYMBOLISM

*To name* an object is to suppress three-quarters of the pleasure in the poem which stems from the joy of divining little by little; *to suggest*, there is the dream. It is the perfect use of this mystery which constitutes the symbol: to evoke an object little by little in order to show a state of soul . . .

S. Mallarmé<sup>1</sup>

There is a way of drawing in which imagination is set free from troublesome concern with real details, so that it is at liberty to render things conceived solely in the mind . . . My whole originality consists in bringing to life, in a human way, improbable beings and making them live according to the laws of probability, by putting, as far as possible, the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible.

O. Redon<sup>2</sup>

These two statements, one by a Symbolist poet, one by a Symbolist painter of the late nineteenth century in France, indicate a common desire to raise the evanescent world of the imagination to first place in art. The Symbolists rejected the idea that the artist must "copy nature"; mere description of the visible world, however beautiful, was to them insufficient. Instead, they wanted art to evoke an invisible world through mystery and indirection. The poets were rebelling against literary naturalism and realism. The painters were rejecting the realistic approach acclaimed by Courbet ("Show me an angel and I will paint one"), and the slick sentimentality of academic style (Bouguereau's "pressure of the heel on the right thigh and the adorable dimple that it makes . . .").<sup>3</sup> In addition, Symbolist painters considered Impressionism—itself still an avant-garde movement at the time—as a further extension of realism, as a kind of super-translation of the visible.

Among the painters there was no definite "school" of Symbolism, and these new ideas appeared in the work of various diverse and often unconnected artists. Mallarmé and his literary friends eagerly sought out painters whose theories might be equated with their own, but were as likely to include Impressionists among their group as not. While Whistler, Munch, Redon, and Gauguin were often invited to *Les Mardis*, so were such exponents of Impressionism as Monet, Degas, Manet, and Morisot. Mallarmé marvelled at "the eye, the hand . . ." of Manet; but the painters trying to create Symbolist paintings wanted passionately to go beyond that direct message from nature to the eye to the hand putting it on canvas.

The theoretical basis for visual Symbolism is sometimes thought to have come from literary men. Baudelaire may be cited from remarks in 1859:

Line and color, both of them have the power to set one thinking and dreaming; the pleasures which spring from them are of different natures, but of a perfect equality and absolutely independent of the subject of the picture.<sup>4</sup>

But the Romantic painter Delacroix wrote the same ideas in 1847:

But the beauty of verse . . . resides in a thousand secret harmonies and conventions which make up the power of poetry and which go straight to the

imagination; in just the same way the happy choice of forms and the right understanding of their relationship acts on the imagination in the art of painting.<sup>5</sup>

Delacroix expressed one of the central Symbolist ideas in 1850:

I have told myself a hundred times that painting . . . was no more than the pretext, the bridge between the mind of the painter and that of the spectator. Cold exactitude is not art; ingenious artifice, when it *pleases* or when it *expresses*, is art itself.<sup>6</sup>

Rather than viewing visual Symbolism as stemming from literary Symbolism, we must see the two movements as running parallel, crossed by similar aims. Painters and poets with the same desire to create meaningful symbols obviously must find differing kinds of artistic solutions. The mere injection of an obvious and old-fashioned symbolism into the old frameworks would not do in either case. Thus the poets introduced new technical aspects of poetry such as free verse; the painters effected a complete change in stylistic structure, sloughing off the old concepts of space, color, and plastic form, and developing flat surface patterns with expressive or symbolic color and line. There were two problems involved, as Maurice Denis, a young and perceptive art critic and painter understood:

. . . the objective deformation, which relies on a purely esthetic and decorative concept, on technical principles of color and composition; and the subjective deformation, which puts into play the personal feeling of the artist, his soul, his poetry . . .<sup>7</sup>

Who, then, were the Symbolists? What was Symbolism for painters? Everyone had a different definition and a different label in this complex and disunified movement. So emerged Post-Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, the Decadents, Divisionism, Synthetism, Cloisonnism, Neo-Traditionalism, *Les Nabis*, Intimism, and so on—the many varieties of the revolt against realism which finally resulted at the turn of the century in the total revolution which we call “modern art.”

The different aspects of visual Symbolism, intersected by ideas from the poets, may be seen as a spectrum, running from the “conservative right” (narrative, anecdotal, literary, stressing fantastic imagery, but with obvious symbolism and clinging to traditional composition) to the “liberal left” (non-literary and non-anecdotal, subtly symbolic, with symbol and meaning completely fused, and an entirely new pictorial organization).

THE DECADENTS. To begin on the “far right,” one aspect of Symbolism—the fascination with a particular kind of subject matter—was established when Joris-Karl Huysmans’ sensational novel *A Rebours* was published in 1884. Huysmans admired anything smacking of the fantastic and the esoteric, the exploitation of the senses pushed virtually to perversion. He firmly rejected the natural and real:

The secret lies in knowing how to proceed, how to concentrate deeply enough to produce the hallucination and succeed in substituting the dream reality for reality itself. Artifice, besides, seemed . . . the final distinctive mark of man's genius . . . There can be no doubt about it: this eternal driveling old woman [Nature] is no longer admired by true artists, and the moment has come to replace her by artifice.<sup>8</sup>

His book recommended the painters of "artifice": Gustave Moreau, Rodolphe Bresdin, and Odilon Redon. For example, Huysmans has his world-weary hero, Des Esseintes, dreaming over Moreau's painting of *Hérodiade*, where darkness "drowned the supernumeraries of the crime enshrouded in their dead colors, and only sparing the aquarelle whites, revealed the woman's jewels and heightened her nudity."<sup>9</sup> Des Esseintes then imagines her reciting the "bizarre and delicate lines of Mallarmé's poem *Hérodiade*." Huysmans lauded Moreau's use of ethnographic sources, myths, enigmas, sinister allegories, his "symbols of perversities and superhuman loves." In Bresdin's sketch *Comedy of Death*, Huysmans admired this kind of symbolism:

. . . fantastic landscape bristling with trees, brushwood and tufts of grass resembling phantom, demon forms, teeming with rat-headed, pod-tailed birds . . . A Christ speeds across a clouded sky . . .<sup>10</sup>

Odilon Redon seemed to Huysmans to be a painter in love with the fantastic, a purveyor of monsters. He introduced Redon to Mallarmé and the painter was drawn into the circle of *Les Mardis*. The poets saw him as an ideal illustrator for their fantasies. Pleased and flattered, Redon let them impose ideas upon him. Huysmans urged him to read Edgar Allan Poe, as a proper Decadent. Though Redon did not find Poe especially to his liking, he added captions taken from Poe's writing to some of his prints. He found this to be a mistake. "I lost all my innocence," he said, and whereas formerly he had been admired for his "monsters" he now was considered a true literary illustrator. To Redon's dismay, even the perceptive Mallarmé's chief comment regarding a new batch of his graphic work was that he was "jealous of the captions." This is one example (and there are others) of the kind of attitude that caused the Symbolist painters to complain that the writers did not understand what they were trying to do. Redon was deeply involved in a personal search into his subconscious; he vehemently denied the suggestion that he found his "monsters" by looking into a microscope. Not only was he striving to make visible the world of his fertile imagination, he also was attempting to perform the painter's work of resolving many new ideas of picture organization. He was dealing with the problem of "objective deformation" in which space was to be drastically simplified, and arabesque and geometric forms were to be used for a new sort of composition. He wrote:

Nature also demands that we shall obey the gifts which she has given us. Mine led me into the world of dreams; I suffered the torments of

imagination and the surprises which it presented to me under the pencil; but I guided and controlled these surprises according to the laws of artistic organization which I know, which I feel, with the sole purpose that they should exercise upon the spectator, through a process of attraction, all the evocative power, all the charm of the vague that lies at the extreme limits of thought . . . . This evocative art is to be found entire in the stirring art of music, where it is at its freest and most radiant; but it is also present in my art . . . .<sup>11</sup>

Redon was truly on the threshold of modern art, and later must be mentioned in his place on the progressive "far left" of Symbolism.

Huysmans also praised another manifestation of Decadent art in the work of Félicien Rops:

Adopting the old concept of the Middle Ages, that man floats between Good and Evil, debated between God and the Devil, between Purity of divine essence and Lewdness from the Devil himself, M. Félicien Rops, with a Primitive soul, has accomplished the reverse of Memling; he has penetrated, summed up Satanism in admirable prints which are inventions, symbols, an art incisive and nervous, ferocious and distressing, truly unique.<sup>12</sup>

Today these admirable etchings are judged so pornographic that they must languish in locked cases. Huysmans himself pursued this subject matter in his novel *La-Bas*, investigating the mysteries of the Black Mass. Later in *En Route* he explored true Catholic mysticism, and here is a note which runs through the entire Symbolist movement—the turning to religion as an answer to *fin-de-siècle* anxieties. Many of the Symbolists were, or became, devout Catholics; others were interested in such by-ways as Theosophy, Swedenborgianism, Eclectic Buddhism, Gnosticism, the Cult of Light, and of Isis. Religious motifs appear often in Symbolist art.

As a kind of "lunatic fringe" on the conservative side of Symbolism, was the *Rose-Croix* (Rosicrucian) group. Self-styled "Sâr" Joséphin Peladan, their high priest, attempted to guide contemporary painting through his pronouncements and through a notable art exhibition in 1892. The Symbolists paid him some amused attention. Peladan organized his exhibition along the following lines:

. . . (he) banned from his show not only all historical, military, and patriotic subjects—'even if well painted'—all humorous, oriental, and illustrative works, but also 'all representation of contemporary life, either private or public; portraits unless the sitters are in the costumes of an earlier age and thus achieve style; all rustic scenes, all landscapes except those executed in the manner of Poussin; seascapes and sailors; domestic animals and those used in sports; flowers, fruits, etc.' Instead he had pronounced himself in favor of the 'Catholic dogma and Italian subjects from Margharitone to Andrea Sacchi; the interpretation of oriental theologies with the exception of those of the yellow races; expressive or decorative allegories; the nude exalted in the style of Primaticcio, of Correggio, or expressive heads like those by Leonardo and Michaelangelo.'<sup>13</sup>

Needless to say, such dogma did not lead to any important innovations in Symbolism; it was a confused reflection of current ideas in a distorted mirror.

IDEATIONAL SYMBOLISM. While Symbolism was often obscure, it was not always so odd. A middle-of-the-road formulation appeared in the literary Symbolist Manifesto of 1886 by Jean Moréas. He rejected the "Decadent" label for the poets, proposed "Symbolist" instead, and stressed the importance of the Idea. He wrote:

Enemy of instruction, of declamation, of false sensibility, of objective description, symbolic poetry seeks to clothe the Idea in a perceptible form which will not be an end in itself, but which, serving to express the Idea, remains subservient. The Idea, in its turn, must not let itself be deprived of the sumptuous robes of exterior analogies; because the essential character of symbolic art consists in never going straight to the center of the Idea. Thus, in this art, the pictures of nature, the actions of humans, all the actual phenomena would not be manifested themselves, these are the sensible appearances destined to represent their esoteric affinities with Primordial Ideas.<sup>14</sup>

Several painters can be equated with this kind of thought. Puvis de Chavannes is one, and he said of his own work,

For all clear thought, there exists a plastic equivalent . . . . A work of art emanates from a kind of confused emotion in which it is contained as is an animal in its egg. I meditate upon the thought buried in this emotion until it appears lucidly and as distinctly as possible before my eyes. Then I search for an image which translates it with exactitude . . . . This is Symbolism if you like.<sup>15</sup>

Puvis' style rendered essential forms with simplicity and subdued colors, employing an understandable allegory which was eagerly accepted by the *littérateurs*. Albert Aurier commended Puvis for trying to find the "mysterious significance of lines, of light, and of shadows . . ." and Fontainas found that Puvis was able to represent philosophical ideals through harmonious groups of figures. Teodor de Wyzewa recalled later that,

. . . we had enough and too much of realism, enough and too much of so-called verity, and of that harsh relief (or modeling), and of that blinding color with which some endeavor to overwhelm us. We were struck by a thirst for dreams, for emotions, for poetry. Satiated with light too vivid and too crude, we longed for fog. And it was then that we attached ourselves passionately to the poetic and misty art of Puvis de Chavannes.<sup>16</sup>

Whether Puvis' work was true Symbolic interpretation was debatable, and Gauguin once wrote with some scorn,

Puvis explains his idea, yes, but he doesn't paint it . . . . Puvis titles a picture *Purity* and to explain that paints a young virgin with a lily in her hand—known Symbol; thus understood. Gauguin to the title *Purity* would paint a landscape with limpid waters, undefiled by civilized man, with perhaps one figure. Without going into details, there is a world between Puvis and me.<sup>17</sup>



Nevertheless, Gauguin, along with many of the other painters admired and learned from Puvis de Chavannes, so much so, in fact, that even in Tahiti Gauguin posted one of Puvis' prints on the walls of his house.

Eugène Carrière is often mentioned as a Symbolist, and occasionally was accepted as such even by the Mallarmé circle, but he served chiefly as a vulgarizer of the new ideas, employing the "misty" style in a banal way.

NEO-IMPRESSIONISM, DIVISIONISM. A special and very controlled way of depicting nature was followed by another group of painters involved in Symbolist theory; they rejected fantasy, narration, or allegory, and hoped to find scientifically the symbolic qualities of line, color, and composition. Georges Seurat led this reform of Impressionism, using a geometric organization of the picture surface. In 1886, his *Sunday Afternoon on the Grande Jatte* was given the label "Neo-Impressionist" by the writer Félix Fénéon. The technique (Divisionism), involved the use of small dabs of pure color which created a vibration in the viewer's eye. Delacroix and the scientific theories of Chevreul and Charles Henry had been consulted for this concept. Seurat was joined by Paul Signac, as well as Camille Pissarro and his son Lucien, Luce, Angrand, Cross, Dubois-Pillet, Petitjean, Couturier, and the Belgian van Rysselberghe. Seurat claimed *Harmony* was the supreme factor in art, and attempted to establish the emotional content of various tones, colors, and lines:

Gaiety of tone is given by the dominance of light; of color, by the dominance of warm colors; of line, by the dominance of lines above the horizontal. . . . Sadness of tone is given by the dominance of dark; of color, by the dominance of cold colors; and of line, by downward directions.<sup>18</sup>

Signac worked with the psychological effects of line, and thought of some of his paintings as evocative of music, giving them such titles as *Adagio*, *Larghetto*, and so forth.

EXHIBITIONS OF *Les Vingt*. Many artists with *avant-garde* ideas were able to find a forum with the *Société des Indépendents* and *Les Vingt* founded in Belgium in 1884. Never an organized program, but simply a meeting place for all kinds of artists, the exhibitions included many names associated with Symbolism, among them Ferdinand Hodler, James Ensor, Jan Toorop, Vincent van Gogh, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, James Whistler, and Paul Gauguin.

Hodler called his form of Symbolism "Parallelism":

I call Parallelism any kind of repetition. . . . If an object is pleasant, repetition will increase its charm; if it expresses sorrow or pain, then repetition will intensify its melancholy. On the contrary, any subject that is peculiar or unpleasant will be made unbearable by repetition. So repetition always acts to increase intensity . . .<sup>19</sup>

The original and unconventional James Ensor concocted his own kind of Symbolism in such paintings as his shocking *Entry of Christ into Brussels*,

full of distorted masked forms and expressionistic color, but basically anecdotal. His sensitivity to the painterly quality of words links him to the ideas of "correspondances" or "affinities" among the arts, a widely-held Symbolist conviction. He wrote:

Ah, but I love to draw beautiful words, like trumpets of light . . . words in the steel-blue of certain insects, words with the scent of vibrant silks, subtle words of fragrant roses and sea-weed, prickly words of sky-blue wasps, words with powerful snouts . . .<sup>20</sup>

The element of shock and defiance in his painting was an aspect of Symbolism generally, a symptom of the revolt against materialism.

Jan Toorop, from Holland, was inspired by Maurice Maeterlinck to make use of symbols. His drawings stress a sinuous line and an extremely elaborate iconography to suggest melancholy moods. Woman's hair is an obsessive symbol in his work, as it is in Munch's, and interestingly, appears in the poetry of Mallarmé.

Van Gogh, while often starting from an observation of nature, incorporated two factors into his painting which were to be important for Symbolism. His understanding of Japanese print composition had changed his presentation of reality ("You see how simple the conception is. The shadows and the cast shadows are suppressed; it is painted in free flat tones like the Japanese prints"). And secondly, he stressed the emotional qualities of color:

I have tried to express in this picture the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green. The room is blood red and dark yellow with a green billiard table in the center; there are four lemon-yellow lamps with a glow of orange and green . . . The color is not locally true from the *trompe-l'oeil* realist point of view; it is color suggesting some emotions . . . I have tried to show that the cafe is a place where one can ruin one's self, go mad, or commit a crime.<sup>21</sup>

Albert Aurier, who first introduced van Gogh to the public, said,

. . . he considers this enchanting pigment only as a kind of marvelous language destined to express the Idea. Almost always he is a symbolist . . . feeling the constant urge to clothe his ideas in precise, ponderable, tangible forms, in intensely corporeal and material envelopes.<sup>22</sup>

Toulouse-Lautrec and Whistler were profoundly affected by Japanese prints also, and used them as a key to show reality in a new way. Toulouse-Lautrec absorbed himself in the expressive qualities of their serpentine lines, and his delicately modulated arabesques, flattened space, and decorative surfaces were to stimulate the Art Nouveau movement.

Whistler's role in the art theory of the time was more influential than has been recognized. Mallarmé's close friend, he joined *Les Mardis* whenever he was in Paris. His famous "Ten O'Clock Lecture" given in London in 1885,

impressed Mallarmé so much that he begged to make the French translation. Thus its ideas became food for thought for the Symbolists.

Nature contains the elements in colour and form, of all pictures, as the keyboard contains the notes of all music. But the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group with science, these elements, that the result may be beautiful—as the musician gathers his notes, and forms his chords, until he bring forth from chaos glorious harmony. To say to the painter that Nature is to be taken as she is, is to say to the player, that he may sit on the piano. . . . For some time past, the unattached writer has become the middleman in the matter of Art, and his influence, while it has widened the gulf between the people and the painter, has brought about the most complete misunderstanding as to the aim of the picture. For him a picture is more or less a hieroglyph or symbol of story. Apart from a few technical terms, for the display of which he finds an occasion, the work is considered absolutely from a literary point of view . . . he deals with it as with a novel—a history—or an anecdote. He fails entirely and most naturally to see its excellence, or demerits—artistic—and so degrades Art, by supposing it a method of bringing about a literary climax . . . . Meanwhile the painter's poetry is quite lost to him—the amazing invention, that shall have put form and color into such perfect harmony. . . . A curious matter, in its effect upon the judgment of these gentlemen, is the accepted vocabulary, of poetic symbolism, that helps them by habit, in dealing with Nature: a mountain, to them, is synonymous with height—a lake, with depth—the ocean, with vastness—the sun, with glory.<sup>23</sup>

This astonishing criticism undoubtedly clarified a good many ideas for the painters, and must have set the glib critics back a bit on their heels. Certainly it pointed the way to new freedom and subtlety for the artist. As for Whistler's painting, his mysteriously suggestive series of *Nocturnes* were a pictorial answer to Mallarmé's expressed desire to find the image "distilled from the dreams called forth by things."

SYNTHETISM, CLOISONNISM. Though Gauguin later rejected the title of "Symbolist" as another form of "sentimentality," he must be counted as one of the great figures of the movement. His contributions to the theory were many. He mused on the psychological content of the elements of nature:

See an enormous spider in a forest tree-trunk, involuntarily you feel a terrible sensation; why do you dislike to touch a rat and similar things: there is no reason for these feelings. Our five senses go directly to the brain impressed by an infinity of things which no education can destroy. I have concluded that there are noble lines, lying ones, and so forth; the straight line creates infinity, the curve limits creation . . . . The numbers 3 and 7, have they been explored enough? Colors are still more explicative . . . . There are noble tones, common ones, tranquil consoling harmonies, others which excite you by their boldness.<sup>24</sup>

Gauguin scorned hackneyed or obvious symbols, recommended study of primitive art, demanded simplifications of form, and in general called for greater freedom and imagination on the part of the painter. With Emile

20. WHISTLER *Portrait of Mallarmé*



21. WHISTLER *Portrait of Mallarmé*



Bernard, at Pont-Aven, he developed the concept of Synthetism ("where synthesis of a form and of a color are used in considering the dominant quality") which involved the distortion of both form and color into a simplified and decorative pattern, the purpose being to give a heightened expression of the artist's personal vision. When he painted *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, Gauguin showed the scene as it might have appeared in the vivified imaginations of the Breton women who had just heard their pastor explain the story. The color is expressive and anti-realistic (the meadow is red instead of green); the line is used for emphatic decorative effect; the space is flattened and unreal. He wrote his friend Schuffenecker:

Some advice, don't paint too much from nature. Art is an abstraction, extract it from nature as you dream before it, and think more of the creation which will result; this creation is the only means of rising toward God.<sup>25</sup>

Gauguin met Mallarmé in 1890; the Pont-Aven painters consciously tried to utilize some of the ideas of the literary Symbolists. Gauguin wrote later from Tahiti:

. . . my dream is not tangible, contains no allegory; a musical poem has no need of a libretto, as quoted from Mallarmé . . . . The essential in a work consists precisely in 'what is not expressed: it is implicit in the lines, without color or words, it is not constituted materially in it.' Mallarmé was heard to exclaim before one of my pictures of Tahiti, 'It is extraordinary how such mystery can be put into such brilliance.'<sup>26</sup>

Working in Brittany with Gauguin, Emile Bernard and Louis Anquetin had brought with them the theory of Cloisonnism, which owed much to Japanese prints, and involved surrounding forms with closed lines so that the colors are enclosed in compartments, like the medieval *cloisonné* technique. Bernard explained:

We must simplify in order to disclose its meaning . . . I had two ways to achieve this. The first consisted in confronting nature and in simplifying it with utmost rigor . . . in reducing its lines to eloquent contrasts, its shades to the seven fundamental colors of the prism . . . . The second way to obtain this result consisted in relying on conception and memory and in disengaging myself from all direct contact [with nature] . . . . The first possibility meant, so to speak, a simplified handwriting which endeavored to catch the symbolism inherent in nature; the second was an act of my will signifying through analogous means my sensibility, my imagination, and my soul.<sup>27</sup>

NEO-TRADITIONALISM AND LES NABIS. On the "liberal left" of Symbolist art theory appears a group of painters who organized themselves into a society called *Les Nabis* (The Prophets). They had weekly meetings at the home of Paul Ranson, monthly dinners at *l'Os à Moelle* in the Passage Brady in Paris, gave each other special titles, and took a lively interest in contemporary music, drama, poetry, and philosophy as well as painting.

Their initial inspiration came from a small painting on the lid of a cigar box. This was the famous *Talisman* which Paul Sérusier brought back from Pont-Aven in 1888 to show to his friends painting at the *Académie Julian*. Maurice Denis tells the story:

. . . he showed us at the studio a wood panel representing a landscape that he had painted under the direction of Gauguin: a landscape of the Bois d'Amour, put together under the formula of Synthetism, which he called the *Talisman*, and which he gave me later as a relic.

How do you see those trees, Gauguin had said. They are yellow: very well, put down some yellow; this rather blue shadow, paint it with pure ultramarine; these reddish leaves, try vermillion red.<sup>28</sup>

This technique was accompanied by the advice that nature should not be copied but "represented" by transposing it into the most vivid colors possible, surrounding them with an expressive arabesque, simply to please the eye. The *Talisman* presents to the viewer a series of overlapping planes of color, and is so abstract that it barely suggests natural forms. Maurice Denis wrote his definition of the new principles thus demonstrated as a formulation of Neo-Traditionalism:

Remember that a picture, before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or any anecdote whatever,—is essentially a plane surface covered with colors arranged in a certain order.<sup>29</sup>

Such a battle cry relegated subject matter and story-telling qualities to a very minor place, and stressed color and arrangement. The new vision toward which Post-Impressionism had been moving had been attained. *Les Nabis* included Sérusier, Denis, Ranson, Pierre Bonnard, Félix Vallotton, Aristide Maillol, Jan Verkade, Edouard Vuillard, plus a few others. Their work reflected in various degrees the simplicity of Italian primitives, Japanese block prints, the color theories of the Neo-Impressionists, Puvis de Chavannes, the subtle mysteries of Redon, and above all the Brittany paintings of Gauguin and Bernard. They opened their dinner meetings with an incantation by the presiding *Nabi*: "Sounds, colors, and words have a miraculously expressive power beyond all representation and even beyond the literal meaning of the words."<sup>30</sup> It was a kind of distillation of all the Symbolist ideas which had gone before, and mirrored Gauguin's statement that,

There is an impression resulting from any certain arrangement of colors, lights, and shadows. It is called the music of the picture. Even before knowing what the subject is . . . this emotion goes to the most intimate part of the soul.<sup>31</sup>

*Nabi* paintings were what Valéry wanted for poetry: "the explanation of a delicate and beautiful world," and though they sometimes included cryptic symbols (alchemists' signs and the Tau cross), their basic motifs were simple and lyrical abstractions. Sérusier said,

Your taste will appear also in the choice of motif. That may be whatever you will, but be careful that this choice unveils the tendency of your spirit . . . . Study the exterior world in its laws and not in its accidents.<sup>32</sup>

The work of *Les Nabis* showed a final fusion of the "objective deformation" with the "subjective deformation." Forms lay flat on the picture surface, separated by contrasts of light and dark, or color, or outlines; shapes were soft and "biological," or decorated with surface embellishments. Denis wrote:

The subject of the painter is in himself. Nature is an inexhaustible repertoire of motifs for the one who can see them . . . . All spectacles, emotions, dreams are summed up for him in combinations of patches (*taches*), in the rapport between tones and hues, in lines. What he expresses is never some sort of anonymous fact, a pure accident, it is the interior rhythm of his being, his esthetic endeavor, his necessary beauty.<sup>33</sup>

Redon, whom Denis called "precisely the Mallarmé of painting," also may take his place on the "left" with his late work, for by 1886 he had achieved the newest kind of vision:

. . . the organization of the picture surface in rich textures, or as they are called today, graphisms. A whole generation of 'Tachists' can find here a model going much further back than Monet's Waterlilies. In fact this combination of the decorative with the structural is not only a good way of overcoming the dangers of the objective, representational, illustrative element, it was also, precisely during these decisive years, Redon's most important contribution to Post-Impressionism; it is his own version of the 'synthesis.'<sup>34</sup>

Thus Redon's dreamy and evocative floral pieces are more the symbols of flowers than real still lifes, and with them he had reached a peak of poetic distillation comparable to that of *Les Nabis*.

INTIMISM. Bonnard and Vuillard became especially known for this style, generally rendering lyrical interiors in which scenes of every-day life are given a new decorative existence. Denis wrote of Bonnard:

He recreated each spectacle or each object with a spirit always new, obedient to his dream . . . substituting for natural logic . . . . Ah! the two deformations, objective and subjective, he practiced them without thinking . . . .<sup>35</sup>

Vuillard revealed a sense of restrained emotion which produced paintings of subtly controlled symbolism. Jacques Emile Blanche called him "the gourmand who became an ascete." Maeterlinck described his kind of vision:

. . . seated in his armchair, listening simply to all the eternal laws which reign throughout his house, interpreting, without understanding, all that there is in the silence of doors and windows, and in the little voice of light, submitting to the presence of his soul and of his destiny . . . .<sup>36</sup>

The half-open door to a shadowy, empty room was one of Vuillard's favorite themes, interestingly echoing Mallarmé's description of the kind of illustration he would prefer to accompany his poetry:

... an open window at night, the two shutters fastened, a room empty of persons, in spite of the closed shutters, a night made of absence and questioning, without furnishings ...<sup>37</sup>

With such a motif of intimate *ambiance*, Vuillard overcame "the elaborate accoutrements" of some of the earlier forms of Symbolism.

In the mid 1890's *Les Nabis* participated in a project long dear to their fellow intellectuals—that of the "total" art-work. The idea stemmed from Richard Wagner's dream of a synthesis of the arts—music, literature, and painting—and resulted in the productions of the new Symbolist theatre. *Les Nabis* enthusiastically painted scenery, and found a new interest in minor and decorative arts of all kinds, including posters and covers for the notable magazine of Symbolism, *La Revue Blanche*.

PRE-EXPRESSIONISM. On the extreme "far left" of Symbolist art is the Norwegian Edvard Munch. He went to Paris in 1885, and immersed himself in the Symbolist milieu. He knew Mallarmé, and portrayed him in lithograph and wood-cut. He absorbed the expressive quality of van Gogh, the arabesque of Toulouse-Lautrec, and the decorative color of Gauguin. He responded to the current interest in dreams and the psyche. In his *Frieze of Life* he hoped to depict all human emotions, to show "the modern life of the soul." He often used somewhat literary symbols (menacing shadows, vampires, spermatozoa and embryos, women's hair), but his symbols were uniquely transformed by painterly vision and given an existence of their own. His "crystallization" of a feeling of total anxiety is demonstrated in *The Cry*, in which he essentially gives visual form to sound waves. He described his creative process:

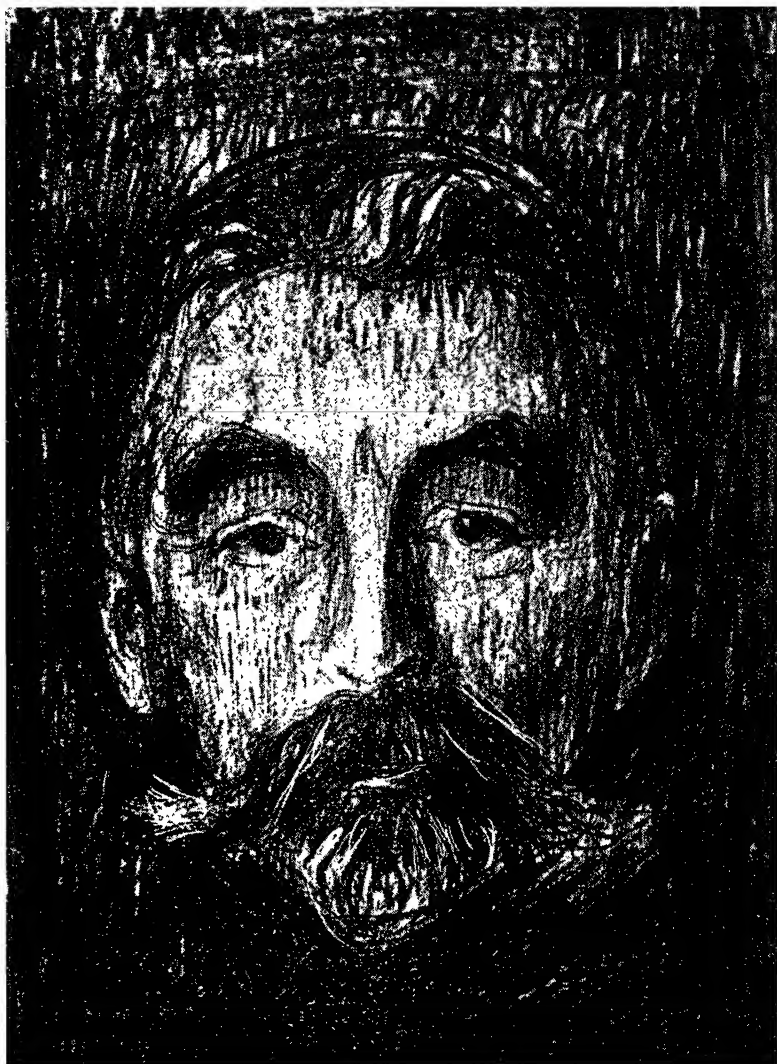
I was tired and ill—I stopped and looked out across the fjord—the sun was setting—the clouds were dyed red like blood. I felt a scream pass through nature; it seemed to me I could hear the scream. I painted this picture—painted the clouds as real blood—The colours were screaming ...<sup>38</sup>

In Munch's painting, the symbolistic qualities of color and line are pushed to an extreme point in order to express the painter's emotion.

Albert Aurier, one of the critics who understood and wrote well about the Symbolist movement (in spite of a tragically short career—he died in 1892, aged 27 years), summed up the characteristics of the new art as:

1. Ideational, for its unique ideal will be the expression of the Idea.
2. Symbolistic, for it expresses this Idea by means of forms.
3. Synthetistic, for it will write these forms, these signs, according to a method which is generally understandable.





12. MUNCH *Portrait of Mallarmé*

4. Subjective, for the object will never be considered as an object but as the sign of an idea perceived by the subject.
5. (It is consequently) decorative—for decorative art in its proper sense, as the Egyptians, very probably the Greeks and the Primitives understood it, is nothing but a manifestation of art at once subjective, synthetic, symbolic and ideational.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, at the end of the nineteenth century, the many varieties of symbolism came together to make, in Redon's words, the invisible, visible. The unveiling of *felt* reality was made superior to the reporting of *observed* reality, with the result, as far as painting was concerned, that a new kind of reality was created in which the decorative aspect took precedence over any other approach. The door was opened to the new visions of the twentieth century.

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## NOTES

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7. Maurice Denis, "L'Epoque du Symbolisme," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Ser. 6, II, 1934, pp. 175, 176.
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9. *Ibid.*, p. 293.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
11. From *A Soi-Même*, Berger, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-116.
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21. Rewald, *op. cit.*, p. 234.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 368.
23. James McNeill Whistler, *Ten O'Clock*, London, Chatto and Windus, 188, pp. 14-19.
24. Gauguin, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 288.
27. Rewald, *op. cit.*, p. 193.
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29. Denis, *Théories 1890-1900*, Paris, L. Rouart et J. Watelin, 1920, p. 1.
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19. WHISTLER *The Lagoon, Venice: Nocturne in Blue and Silver*

## MALLARMÉ AND THE VISUAL ARTS

"To Monsieur Mallarmé, the chief of the 'Decadents,' is conceded the position of the most *vingtième siècle* poet in France, and to us has been granted the charming distinction of discovering, to the barbarians in these islands, this latest trill of that Singer." This curious statement is to be found in the London magazine *Whirlwind* (issue of November 15, 1890). Its frontispiece consists of a lithograph, also called *Whirlwind*, which Whistler contributed, accompanied by a poem in French, likewise named *Whirlwind*, written by Mallarmé for the occasion. In a later passage the editorial explains: "Color, harmony, and musical effect alone bring with them that completeness, that polished finish, that correction, which accompany, infallibly, the work of the Master. This man is the *raffiné* Prince of 'Decadents'—the classic of Modernity—Stéphane Mallarmé."

Here we sense the flavor and are presented with the key words, the directions and aspirations of this splendid cultural achievement remembered by some as *la belle époque*, by others as style-movement, by still others as Symbolism. In the eighteen-nineties one witnesses the swinging together of literature, poetry, painting, decorative arts, and music, the trends of different nations converging toward similar goals. The alliance of Mallarmé and Whistler is not only most characteristic, it must also be considered one of the major links in this whole period.

Although the poet's obscure language was little understood and his verses, as late as 1887, were scattered only among small periodicals Mallarmé had long been famous and sought out by writers, poets, critics, painters, and musicians. The regular Tuesday receptions in his home started in 1880 and a decade later had taken on such significance that everybody who counted in the artistic *avant-garde* felt ennobled by being admitted. Strangely enough, there has never been a full account of the *Mardis* given anywhere. We have no list of those who attended, no minutes of the discussions, only the briefest and most fragmentary descriptions of the atmosphere, changing or lasting over the years. Even Henri Mondor who in several volumes explored every corner of the poet's life has only scattered remarks about these meetings. We are told that in the later years they acquired a real ritual, "delegations of admirers and commentators from the provinces, esthetes from London" along with Parisians would come and go. Most participants in their recollections agree that what counted was not an exchange of ideas but the "enchanted monologue" of the master. It was this magic presence that converted the tiny and elegant drawing room into a radiating center of *l'art pour l'art*.

It cannot surprise that Whistler and Mallarmé were attracted by each other as soon as they could measure their distance and their nearness. For years they had lived in the same circle and were somewhat acquainted. Perhaps at first they had too many friends in common, the painters Manet and Degas, the critics Théodore Duret and Gustave Geffroy, to name only a few. But once they had a *tête à tête*, with Monet as mediator, the poet was drawn to the painter-dandy so remote from him in age, origin, and temperament. In translating the *Ten O'Clock Lecture* he began his only active cooperation with a visual artist and assimilated another kind of symbolism that touched his own, to be sure, but also pointed into a different realm. What they shared is the sense for the mystery of the visible. Both would strive for the severance of art from everyday life and its withdrawal to a sanctuary of sheer beauty. Both would address the initiated alone, using obscure, incomplete, hermetic, suggestive means, counting on shock effects and deliberately choosing the distortion of objective relationships, spatial in the one case, syntactic in the other. In order to develop a new reality, poetic in substance, they had to turn away from "photographic" and prosaic realism and find the sphere of pure visibility and significant form. They had to reveal the power of the image.

This they had in common. From there on, however, their paths divided. Whistler, the fighter, in numerous trials, biting statements and sarcastic remarks made a peculiar place for himself in art and society. He had artistic convictions but really no aesthetic system; looking to the Pre-Raphaelite painters, the Japanese woodcut masters and to Velásquez, he hammered out his own style. Mallarmé, amiable, tolerant, and watchful of others, quietly pursued his line in life and poetry even if the promised main work never came to pass. In the American painter, the Frenchman discovered the Nordic compliment to his own aspirations. This "prince of poets," however, had not to lean upon anyone and could, therefore, form that famous Tuesday circle open not only to his disciples but also to a succession of chosen artists and critics.

As was to be expected, Odilon Redon, Paul Gauguin, Edvard Munch and Félicien Rops, related "Decadents" and "Post-Impressionists" were seen in his circle. It is also quite natural that such socially prominent and sufficiently snobbish figures as Jacques-Emile Blanche, Robert de Montesquiou, or Raffaelli did not fail to show up, but one fact is most surprising: so many of Mallarmé's painter friends belong to the group of the Impressionists. Berthe Morisot, Manet, Monet, Renoir, even Degas had the closest relations to our symbolist poet. Have we not come to assume that the stylistic movement was a reaction against the preceding "shapeless" Impressionism and hostile to it? Has not Symbolism, in line with Post-Impressionism, wanted to overcome the impressionist outlook, considered to be "too low in ceiling"?



Imp. G. Courcier & Co. Paris

9. MANET *Portrait of Berthe Morisot*



This, indeed, is one aspect of the problem, a very important one to art historians when they try to classify the stylistic sequences and breaks in this century: Naturalism of the fifties, Impressionism of the seventies, Post-Impressionism of the nineties. Therefore, Impressionism is supposed to be set against the naturalistic rendering, and the structure-seeking "synthetists" against the glorifiers of the fleeting moment. These neat pigeon-holes may be useful devices but the actual flow of art often shows another picture: beside the jumps and leaps one registers gradual transitions from one style to the next, even within one artist, as Cézanne may indicate.

From the viewpoint of Mallarmé the poet, this relation to the artistic movements of his time has still another aspect. What matters to him is to renew language, to purify it, to give it a state of virginity and an archaic quality in order to cleanse it from the clichés of naturalism. "In extremely civilized periods," he says, "art and thought are forced to go backwards and to return to the ideal source." So does Manet, so do the Impressionists, in his view, and therefore, in them he can see allies against the "realistic" platitudes. For him, Impressionism, with no equivalent in literature or poetry, represents "an effort to find again the ancient naïveté by superconscious means." He is charmed by Manet's limpidity, his sense for suggestion (rather than expression). The Impressionists, according to the latest Mallarmé critic, Jean-Pierre Richard, represent to him above all "the spiritual promotion of light." Light, we are told, suggests a unity of the world, a moral homogeneity of the realm of the senses. Light discharges a climate of festivity and splendor. From the article on Berthe Morisot, the poet's most substantial, but alas also his most obscure, statement on the fine arts, I should like to quote a few fragments as applicable to the poet himself as to the painter:

FEERIE, OUI, QUOTIDIENNE . . .  
 LE CHARME EXTRAORDINAIRE . . .  
 POETISER, PAR ART PLASTIQUE . . .  
 EVEILLANT AUX SURFACES LEUR LUMINEUX SECRET . . .  
 SPECTACLE D' ENCHANTEMENT MODERNE.  
 ALCHEMIE—MOBILITE ET ILLUSION . . .

It is, no doubt, Mallarmé's privilege to draw the Impressionist painters close to his own vision and discover aspects commonly overlooked. It is also in his interest to disregard the differences between this generation and the next, to endow Impressionists with such characteristics as *poetry*, *alchemy*, or *luminous secrecy* rather belonging to the fin-de-siècle, as long as he can make a common front with them against the mutual adversary: Naturalism.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is not known whether these questions of aesthetic doctrine were treated at the *Mardis* meetings. Most likely not. Another issue seldom touched on in the enormous literature on Mallarmé, is what influence, if any, the poet

had on the painters or vice versa. The answer must be that it could have been only indirect. Not only because *indirect* was his very style of communication and he despised any directness, but also on account of the basic difference between the arts of language and painting. Except for the purpose of illustrating a text or describing a picture, procedures condemned by all branches of Symbolism, there is no interaction of these arts. We remember that Mallarmé had reminded Degas of the fact that poems are not made of ideas but of words. And Maurice Denis had noticed that in its essence, every painting is first of all a picture surface upon which colors are arranged in a particular pattern and only then is it a war horse, a nude, or some anecdote.

The presence of Mallarmé and his circle helped the painters in quite a different way. Lonely, dispersed, non-conformist as they were, Gauguin in primitive Brittany, Rops in Belgium, Whistler in London, Edvard Munch in far distant Norway, Redon in his self-imposed Parisian exile felt heartened to be in a company where such notions as symbol, musical suggestion, splendor, decorative taste were taken seriously, no matter what these meant to the one or the other. Here was a center where they belonged and where they also were removed from their professional confinement. This applies to the Symbolists, and to a lesser degree, also to the Impressionists. The poets, in turn, were certainly comforted and encouraged by contact with musicians and artists who enlarged the Symbolist realm, in ways "parallel" to their own. In a similar way, the circle of *Les XX* in Brussels and the collaborators of the "Revue Blanche" were assembled.

All these aspects should not be overlooked, but probably the greatest significance of Mallarmé's *Mardis* for the meeting of the arts is still to be found elsewhere: it is the rôle of the mediating critics. In no other country and at no period has there been such a glorious succession of professional critics as in nineteenth century France. Lionello Venturi in his *History of Art Criticism* analyzes the rôle of Gustave Planche, Baudelaire, Thoré, Champfleury, Théodore Silvestre, Théophile Gautier, all rooted both in art and letters and most able to define the masters of their generation, the romantics and realists, and to defend them against the conformist crowd. After the Franco-Prussian War, this tradition is on the way out. The new generation of critics is losing the yardstick by which to measure the great achievement of contemporary Impressionism. Even if later, for no good reason, he changes his mind, J. K. Huysmans in 1876 considered these artists as disorderly, sick, and mad. And Edmond de Goncourt, the great tastemaker of his time, throws his efforts into rehabilitating the bygone style of the eighteenth century. The discovery of Japanese art could have been his great critical contribution, important to Impressionists as well as Post-Impressionists, but actually he only followed the lead of others, and his own Oriental collection was more or less a hodge-podge of heterogeneous knick-knacks. Among his contemporaries, he preferred Gavarni to Daumier, and the



2. DEGAS *Manet Seated, Turned to the Right*

entries in his *Journal* regarding the arts are restricted to gossip, small talk and, at best, reportage with little judgment.

Against this background, one understands much better the rôle of the later critics in Mallarmé's circle. To be sure, in the nineties the neglected Impressionist painters could not longer be considered as a discovery or even as a novelty. Their art had long passed its summit. But the survivors enjoyed this haven where they were given understanding and recognition by such writer-critics as Burty, Duret, Octave Mirbeau, and Gustave Geffroy. Venturi states that the latter "does not put to himself the problem of the limits within which to include Impressionism, . . . and hence he regroups arbitrarily the most discordant tendencies." What Venturi reproaches him for could also be recorded as an asset enabling him to go with his time and to embrace in his critical interpretation the older Impressionism as well as the younger tendencies of Symbolism. Here, in the aura of Mallarmé, it was possible and almost natural to see them together. And here it was also natural that critics of another fiber and horizon would be accepted: Félix Fénéon, anarchist, accuser of Impressionist "arbitrariness," and champion of Seurat and his Divisionist group; Théodore Wyzewa, the Symbolist partisan; and the two Englishmen, George Moore and Arthur Symons, delighted to praise this modern, "decadent" and over-refined culture in art, literature, and life.

\* \* \* \* \*

The exhibition on *Mallarmé—les Mardis*, arranged by the University of Kansas Museum of Art is, as far as I know, the first and only one ever to be held on this topic. The important but somehow elusive relations of the poet with "his" painters are presented under several aspects.

In the center, as it should be, are some of the rare original editions of Mallarmé's poetry. The small volume, *Le tombeau de Charles Baudelaire*, together with the famous translations from Edgar Allen Poe and Whistler point to the "stars" in his firmament.

His likeness has been taken by a number of artists. It is not surprising to see how much the portraits differ from one another, for in the case of Mallarmé the physical appearance would be only the façade of a suggested poetical world. Each painter interpreted the personality he understood. Manet's picture of 1876, the earliest in this group, is superb, certainly among the greatest portraits ever made. The Louvre, by consenting to have it included in this show, helped to reveal the finest, the deepest insight into Mallarmé's existence. The poet at the age of 34, still unknown to the world, misjudged by his few readers, is seen in the intimacy of his painter-friend's studio, completely relaxed and reclining in a comfortable attitude. It is a fleeting view with hair, moustache and hand sketched in, the figure filling only half of the canvas. Yet, every feature "sits" in such a way that the model,

the dreamer awake, is caught in his essence. The fine orchestration of the blue coloring adds, of course, the most to this magic transposition.

The other portraits of Mallarmé, shown here, are from his last decade and reveal another side of his personality: the poet-prince, dignified, graceful, yet reserved. Nadar's photo is said to be the most complete rendering, by those who knew the poet in his later years. It is the ruler over the Tuesday meetings who on such occasions was also sketched by Whistler and by the "Symbolists" Gauguin and Edvard Munch.

Portraits of or by Degas, Manet, Renoir, and Berthe Morisot are included as his friends from the Impressionist group and as artists whose work he liked particularly or added to his own collection.

A final section, not the least, is intended to give an idea of paintings and painters that Mallarmé liked best; a selection from the 18 or more who at different times frequented his *salon*.

Here, Manet, Monet, Rodin, and Berthe Morisot, his real favorites, are accompanied by Puvis de Chavannes and Whistler. (Three of the works come from the Museum's own holdings.) Gauguin, Odilon Redon, and Vuillard belong more directly to the world of Symbolism. In this assembly, however, they have been included, not as representatives of artistic schools and trends—for the poet this was of minor significance as we have seen—but as witnesses of a poetic imagination in a period of growing materialism, united by the veneration for Stéphane Mallarmé.

KLAUS BERGER  
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16. RENOIR

*Portrait of Berthe Morisot*



11. MORISOT

*Little Girl Holding a Cat  
on Her Lap*

## CATALOGUE

Prepared by JEANNE A. STUMP AND MICHAEL STOUGHTON

Entries are arranged alphabetically according to the artists' last names. Measurements are given in inches, height preceding width. Composition sizes of the graphic works are noted.

### PAINTINGS AND PRINTS

BRACQUEMOND, Félix (France, 1833-1914)

1. *Portrait of Edmond and Jules Goncourt*

Etching, 4 x 5¼ inches

Courtesy of The Baltimore Museum of Art, George A. Lucas Collection, The Maryland Institute

Bracquemond was one of the leading figures in the revival of original etching in the mid-nineteenth century and was a technical advisor to both Degas and Manet.

DEGAS, Edgar (France, 1834-1917)

2. *Manet Seated, Turned to the Right*, 1864

Etching, 7¾ x 5 inches

D. 16, fourth state

The Baltimore Museum of Art

Degas was well acquainted with Mallarmé who once wrote to Berthe Morisot that Degas was composing sonnets in order to distract himself from his painting problems. Mallarmé had been giving him advice and mused, "I lose myself conjecturing on these four sonnets by Degas, are they poetry? or a kind of therapeutic bath?"

DENIS, Maurice (France, 1870-1943)

3. *Les Attitudes sont faciles et chastes*

Color lithograph, 15½ x 11 inches

The University of Kansas Museum of Art

Maurice Denis, artist and art theorist for the painters known as *Les Nabis*, made one of the most notable declarations of the new Symbolist painting when, in 1890, he wrote: "Remember that a picture, before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or any anecdote whatever,—is essentially a plane surface covered with colors arranged in a certain order."

GAUGUIN, Paul (France, 1848-1903)

4. *Portrait of Mallarmé*

Etching, 7 3/16 x 5 13/16 inches

Guérin 14, II

The Art Institute of Chicago

Gauguin was introduced to Mallarmé in Paris by the writer Charles Morice. In 1891, the year this portrait of Mallarmé was executed, Gauguin prepared to leave for Tahiti. Mallarmé presided over the farewell banquet and toasted him first, saying: "Gentlemen, let's do first things first; let's drink to the return of Paul Gauguin, but not without admiring his superb conscience which drives him into exile, at the peak of his talent, to seek new strength in a far country and in his own nature."

*Oviri*

Woodcut, 8 1/16 x 4 3/4 inches

Guérin 48

The Art Institute of Chicago

These two impressions of *Oviri*, one in brown, the other in black ink, are mounted together on a card inscribed in Gauguin's own hand:

A Stéphane Mallarmé cette étrange  
figure, cruelle énigme. P. Gauguin, 1895.

They were formerly in Mallarmé's collection, then in the collection of Marcel Guérin, the cataloger of Gauguin's graphic works.

Gauguin admired Mallarmé intensely. He proudly wrote to André Fontainas that the poet, standing before one of Gauguin's Tahiti paintings, had been heard to exclaim in admiration: "It is extraordinary how he can put such mystery into such brilliance."

MANET, Edouard (France, 1882-1883)

6. *The Raven* (set of 5), 1875

Guérin 86, ex libris, a, b, c, d

Lithographs, 10 7/8 x 12 1/16 inches

13 11/16 x 21 1/2 inches

21 3/8 x 13 3/4 inches

21 3/8 x 13 15/16 inches

21 1/4 x 13 9/16 inches

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts

Manet's powerful lithographs interpreting Edgar Allan Poe's poem, mark not only the popularity of Poe among French intellectuals of the time, but also the kind of collaboration between visual and literary artists that the Symbolists favored.

7. *Sketch for the Portrait of Line Campineanu*, c. 1875

Oil, 21 x 17 1/2 inches

The University of Kansas Museum of Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles E. Curry  
Mallarmé was desolate upon the death of Manet, whom he recalled as one of his dearest friends. Mallarmé defended Manet's painting when all the critics were attacking it, and always felt close to the other Impressionists because of Manet's association with them.

8. *Portrait of Mallarmé*, 1876

Oil, 10 13/16 x 14 3/16 inches

Musée du Louvre

It is not known exactly how Manet and Mallarmé met. In 1874, Mallarmé moved to a new apartment, 89 rue de Rome, the site of the famous *Mardis*. Edouard Manet's studio was nearby. Mallarmé, the professor of English, tired from his day of literal translations and glosses for children, occasionally stopped to chat. Soon he was visiting Manet daily. This was the start of a friendship that lasted until Manet's death nearly ten years later.

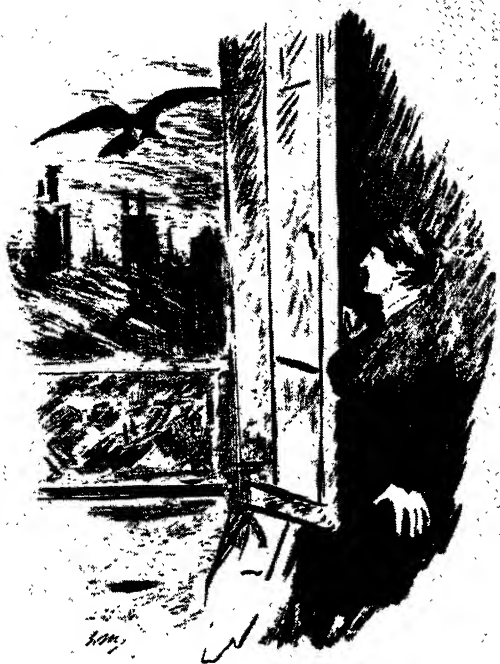
9. *Portrait of Berthe Morisot*, 1872

Guérin 77

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Dick Fund 23.21.22

Manet and Mallarmé were close mutual friends of Berthe Morisot. The painter and the poet were fond of her imperious intelligence, her air of distinguished wildness, and the nervous disorder of her brown hair.





6. MANET *The Raven*

MONET, Claude (France, 1840-1926)

10. *Winter on the Seine, Vetheuil*

Oil, 26 x 36 inches

The University of Kansas Museum of Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs. William A. Findlay, Jr.

Mallarmé once confided to Berthe Morisot: "I am happy just to have lived in the same epoch as Monet."

MORISOT, Berthe (France, 1841-1895)

11. *Little Girl Holding a Cat on Her Lap*

Drypoint, 6 x 4 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches

The Baltimore Museum of Art

Berthe Morisot was for years the confidant of Mallarmé. Although women almost never came to *Les Mardis*, he once wrote to her: "I am late with my lecture paper, a little anxious and not going out . . . this evening (because I would like to see you before going to Oxford and Cambridge, it seems)—everything is mixed up—wouldn't you be able to come with Julie [Morisot's daughter] like a student, and sit with my friends . . . ?"

MUNCH, Edvard (Norway, 1863-1944)

12. *Portrait of Mallarmé*, 1896

Lithograph, 14 11/16 x 11 1/2 inches

Schiller 79 a/b

The Art Institute of Chicago

A letter from Genevieve Mallarmé to her father, May 23, 1897: "The Norwegian draftsman, Mr. Munch, just sent the portrait that he made of you at the beginning of last winter. It's pretty nice, but it resembles those heads of Christ printed on the scarf of a saint, with the caption: 'look long enough and you will see how the eyes close.'"

PUVIS de Chavannes, Pierre (France, 1824-1898)

13. *Au Clair de la Lune*

Oil, 18 1/4 x 15 1/8 inches

The University of Kansas Museum of Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harold Kaye

Poets and painters alike paid homage to the work of Puvis de Chavannes. André Fontainas recalled: "In the presence of Puvis de Chavannes we halted; time was needed for the slow and gentle charm of his grave allegories to sink in." Gauguin, Van Gogh, Seurat, and *Les Nabis* were among the painters inspired by him, although he held himself somewhat aloof from the general current of Symbolism.

6. MANET *The Raven*



REDON, Odilon (France, 1840-1916)

14. *Aurora*, 1910

Oil, 25½ x 32 inches

Private Collection

Redon, whom Maurice Denis termed "precisely the Mallarmé of painting," had qualities of mystery and poetic imagination so much admired by the Symbolists. First introduced to Mallarmé by Joris-Karl Huysmans, Redon often attended *Les Mardis*. The poet and the painter became even closer friends during their summer stays near Fontainebleau.

15. *Serpent Auréole*

Lithography, 11¾ x 8¾ inches

Collection of Mr. William M. Ittmann, Jr.

At *Les Mardis* Redon and Gauguin provided an interesting contrast: Gauguin—*ce rude gars*—noisy and voluble; and Redon, refined and a little withdrawn. Further variety was occasionally added with the appearance of Oscar Wilde carrying a sunflower.

RENOIR, Pierre Auguste (France, 1841-1919)

16. *Portrait of Berthe Morisot*, c. 1892

Drypoint, 4½ x 3 11/16 inches

Delteil 4

The Art Institute of Chicago

Mallarmé frequently enjoyed the company of Renoir at the home of Berthe Morisot. Renoir found each of them pleasant subjects for portraits.

RODIN, Auguste (France, 1840-1917)

17. *Bust of Victor Hugo*, 1884

Drypoint, 8⅞ x 7 inches

Delteil 6, II

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund 16.37.2

A piece of sculpture by Rodin was given a place of honor in Mallarmé's home; the sculptor and the poet shared an admiration for Victor Hugo.

VUILLARD, Edouard (France, 1867-1940)

18. *Les Tuileries*, 1895

Lithograph, 10½ x 11 inches

Collection of Mr. D. Craig Craven

Vuillard is listed among the painters attending *Les Mardis* at the end of 1891, along with Gauguin, Whistler, and Redon. Among the other intellectuals present were Théodor de Wyzewa, Edouard Dujardin, André Fontainas, Félix Fénéon, Gustave Kahn, Jean Moréas, Pierre Louÿs, André Gide, Paul Valéry, Oscar Wilde, Maurice Maeterlinck, Paul Verlaine, Claude Debussy, and Paul Claudel.

WHISTLER, James Abbott McNeill (U. S. A., 1834-1903)

19. *The Lagoon, Venice: Nocturne in Blue and Silver*, c. 1879-80

Oil, 20 x 25¾ inches

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Whistler met Mallarmé in Paris, February 13, 1888. Mallarmé championed Whistler's art theory and painting in France. Whistler had been roundly ridiculed in England for his series of nocturnes and said in response: "Why should not I call my works 'symphonies,' 'arrangements,' 'harmonies,' and 'nocturnes'? I know that many good people think my nomenclature funny and myself 'eccentric.' Yes, 'eccentric' is the adjective they think for me."

20. *Portrait of Mallarmé*, 1894  
Lithograph, 3 11/16 x 2 5/16 inches  
Way 150  
The Art Institute of Chicago

21. *Portrait of Mallarmé*, 1894  
Lithograph, 3 3/8 x 2 3/4 inches  
Way 66  
The Art Institute of Chicago

Whistler lived in Paris during the nineties and frequently attended *Les Mardis*. With his sharp bursts of laughter and witty, penetrating comments, he served to "defrost" the sometimes austere atmosphere of the meetings. He had many things to say about art, and wrote in 1878: "The imitator is a poor kind of creature. If the man who paints only the tree, or flower, or other surface he sees before him were an artist, the king of artists would be the photographer. It is for the artist to do something beyond this: in portrait painting to put on canvas something more than the face the model wears for that one day: to paint the man, in short, as well as his features . . ." Mallarmé said of one of Whistler's lithographic portraits of him: "It is wonderful, the only real study that has ever been made of me and I am smiling at myself."

## BOOKS

Entries are listed alphabetically according to author.

MALLARMÉ, Stéphane (France, 1842-1898)

22. *Le Tombeau de Charles Baudelaire*, 1896

Paris, frontispiece by Félicien Rops

The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

Publication of this volume of tributes to the poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1857) by Mallarmé and many of the leading Symbolist poets was sponsored by the periodical "La Plume" as a means of raising funds for the erection of a monument to Baudelaire. The monument was to have been executed by Rodin.

23. *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, 1876

Paris, frontispiece by Edouard Manet

The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

Manet exhibited his paintings, including the now famous *Olympia* and *Le Déjeuner Sur l'Herbe*, which were rejected in the Salon of 1876, in his studio from April 15 to Sunday, May 1, 1876. At the end of this same Sunday evening, Manet and Mallarmé signed the first proofs of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*. It was a thin volume with several drawings by Manet. The poet was happy with the typography, the painter with the reproduction of his frontispiece, floral decoration, and little vignettes at the ends of the chapters.

24. *Pages*, 1891

Brussels, frontispiece by Pierre Auguste Renoir

The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

A review of *Pages* in *Mercure de France* by Pierre Quillard records a contemporary critic's opinion of Mallarmé: "It seems to me that in the hierarchy of minds, the author of *Pages* holds an eminent rank. He is one of those who has an intuition for the absolute, and can perceive '*les Idées pures*.'"

25. *Les Poésies de S. Mallarmé*, 1899

Brussels, frontispiece by Félicien Rops

The University of Chicago Library

For the first edition of Mallarmé's poetry, a frontispiece symbolizing "absolute art" was provided by Rops. The work represents a muse with a lyre, floating in the clouds. She has her feet on the heads of those who prefer the advantages of success to the agonies of perfection. Still lower, a Pegasus is ridden by the phantom of an emaciated poet who is aiming at the stars.

26. *Vers et Prose. Morceaux choisis*, 1893.

Paris, frontispiece by James Abbott McNeill Whistler

The Library of Congress

The frontispiece of this book is said to have "cost Mallarmé curious efforts of patience." Whistler posed him over and over and "one day, as if all the attempts had added up and led the artist to the easiness of an apparent improvisation, Whistler, in a few lines, seized what had previously escaped him, and obtained from his friend an intense and mobile likeness, a fleeting but profound impression."

POE, Edgar Allan (U. S. A., 1809-1849)

27. *Le Corbeau*, 1875 (French translation by Stéphane Mallarmé)

Paris, illustrations by Edouard Manet

The Library of Congress

Mallarmé began to translate works by Edgar Allan Poe in 1862 and continued with this interest for a period of over fifteen years.

28. *Les Poèmes d'Edgar Poe*, 1888 (French translation by Stéphane Mallarmé)

Brussels, frontispiece by Edouard Manet

The Library of Congress, Rosenwald Collection

Mallarmé dedicated his translation "To the memory of Edouard Manet, these pages, which we read together." The Library of Congress volume includes 35 letters and post cards exchanged by Mallarmé and his publisher, Edmond Deman, concerning the publication of the book.



6. MANET *The Raven*







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